


LAURIE BOULDEN



Weighed Down

A Love Story Worth Lifting Up!



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A Love Story

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Weighed Down: A Love Story Worth Lifting Up

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Thank you to the family that is always there for me, together with the love of people I have met and who will be with me always, and who will be with me always.

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This story is dedicated to all the women who struggle with weight. I struggle, but I'm learning to not let weight define me. God defines me. I am created in His image, and that holds more power than numbers on a scale or size of a dress.

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Chapter 1

Why is food so comforting? Everyone talks about their favorite comfort foods. We're convinced foods make us feel better when we're sick and help us through a broken heart. There are foods for weddings and funerals, as well as for babies and breakups. Many people do okay with food. They eat as much as they like and yet they stay a respectable weight. I eat what I like, and I make sure I have stretchy pants.



Avery wrinkled her nose as she looked in the mirror, twisting from one side to the other. Something about the blue shirt didn't work. Her phone trilled, and she glanced at the bureau. The alarm—which meant it was time to leave. She gave a grunt and looked back at her reflection. It was too late to change. She wagged her finger at herself. "This is what happens when you don't leave work on time."

She walked from her house to the car. Pulling out from the driveway, the nagging feeling followed. Paul had texted four days ago, eager to meet for breakfast on Tuesday. Today was Friday. He'd canceled breakfast with little more than 'something's come up.' Then, silence until today's request for dinner. Traffic was heavy. She used the rearview mirror to check her makeup as she waited at the light on Fifth and Denver. The restaurant was a few blocks further. By the time she pulled into the lot, her stomach was growling.

Paul's white Impala sat beneath a street light, though half a dozen open spaces remained closer to the entrance. Avery slid into the spot beside his car, knowing to park next to him would be easier. Eight months dating Paul and there were things she knew. Some good,

some annoying, some ... well, why go there? *Having a boyfriend is what matters*, she reassured herself, as she crossed the parking lot and pulled open the front door.

Inside was dim, and her eyes needed to adjust. He should be seated at the bar. She noticed his jacket first. Gray, matching his gray pants. Couldn't he, at least, wear a colorful shirt? No, the shirt was white, and against the right background, he may have blended right in and disappeared. Avery gave herself a mental slap. Paul was nice. Nothing wrong with bland.

He turned as she approached, and Avery felt her stomach drop. He met her eyes for a moment, then looked down, shoving his hands in his pockets. Oh, no, this wasn't happening! This was Paul, unremarkable but steady.

"I think they got a table for us." He stepped close but didn't pull his hands out of his pockets.

Avery walked beside him, mind reeling. He did pull out her chair for her but then sat across the table. His uncharacteristic gesture cinched it. In the eight months they dated, he always sat beside her, never across.

Avery placed the menu on the plate in front of her. "What's going on?"

"How about we order and talk over dinner?"

"I don't think so." She took a breath. "What's going on?"

"You're an amazing, wonderful woman."

"But?" She knew from the way he spoke it wasn't really a compliment.

"I care about you. A lot. I'm just not *in love* with you." He took a breath. "I haven't been for some time."

Earthquake. Tornado. Car crashing through the front of the building? Anything to pull me out of this situation. She looked around, but the other diners ate their meals; their quiet hum a testament to the quality of the chef. She faced Paul. "How can that be? You haven't said anything, haven't acted differently."

"But I've been thinking about falling *out* of love. I'm sorry. How about we eat and talk?"

"No." Avery stood, and a few of the other patrons looked her way. She didn't care. It was probably a good thing water hadn't been brought to the table yet, or Paul would be wearing some. "I'm ..."

What exactly could she say? "Goodbye."

Avery Jacobs walked from the restaurant, holding her head high and shoulders straight, shoes clacking on the concrete walkway. *Really? The relationship was over just like that?* She couldn't quite wrap her head around the idea. Part of her wanted to cry, and part of her felt relief. *Why would she feel relief?* She settled inside her blue Yaris and then looked at herself in the rearview mirror. Chubby cheeks, not a double chin but round all the same.

The feel of her weight crashed in on her and pulled her down as she drove away from the restaurant. Weight was her problem, her nemesis. It was the reason he left—Paul left. She blinked back the burning sensation in her eyes. There was too much traffic, too many other vehicles on the road to lose it while she drove. She took a shaky breath and focused on the vehicle in front of her. But with the growl of her stomach, her thoughts turned to dinner.

Avery pulled into the grocery store around the corner from her house. The scent of rotisserie chicken wafted through the air, and she followed her nose to the back of the store. Hot roasted chicken for dinner, and she'd also nab a carton of potato salad. She chewed her thumbnail as she noticed only big cartons remained in the cold case. She could cover two meals with that. She glanced over other selections in the case. The chicken fingers looked good, she could have them for lunch tomorrow. A trip down the canned fruit aisle and she found cranberry sauce. She veered toward the checkout lanes via the ice cream aisle.



Not much later, Avery curled on one corner of the couch in her living room. A dinner plate sat empty on the hassock, and she held the carton of ice cream with a towel to ward off the cold. She closed

her eyes to savor the sweetness melting across her tongue. *There's something about toffee chunk coffee ice cream that makes the world a better place.* Tears on her cheeks didn't matter so much. Her heart hurt a tiny bit less. At least, she told herself there was less pain.

"You're a beautiful woman." She whispered the taunt, curling her nose in derision as she scooped another spoonful of Ben and Jerry's into her mouth. She had never been beautiful. Never tried to be. Women like her couldn't be ... beautiful.

The spoon scraped the bottom of the carton. She frowned. She'd only meant to have a few scoops, not eat the full pint. How many calories in a pint? She moaned. It didn't matter anymore; he was gone.

Grunting in frustration, she pushed herself from the couch and walked into the kitchen. Under-cabinet lighting showed off the golden tones of the granite counter. She placed the carton near the sink. It toppled over, pulled down by the weight of the spoon. That's how she felt, dragged down by her weight. She used the back of her hand to wipe her damp cheeks and then rubbed her hand against the white chintz skirt.

Walking into her bedroom, she crossed to the standing mirror. "Mirror, mirror on the wall..." She made a face. No magical mirror was needed to tell her she was not the fairest in the world. The reflection was ... round: round hips, round waist, round face, and round breasts too small to be considered curvaceous. The pale blue blouse didn't hide the fact that her stomach stuck out. The long, white three-tiered skirt wasn't bad. She twisted to one side and then the other. Almost every inch of her had been covered, hiding the mess underneath. Her hair didn't look bad. She'd seen the shoulder length bob in a magazine, trying thick bangs for once. There wasn't much difference between the color of her brown hair and eyes.

She looked the same eight months ago when she met Paul. What had changed? He found something better. Someone thinner.

"You're so stupid," she glared at the woman in the mirror. What was difficult about going on a diet? Avery shut off the light. She didn't want to look at herself any longer. She peeled her clothes

from her body, throwing them onto the floor and fumbling for a nightshirt. She looked good in the dark, it was the best place for her.

She slumped into bed. Alone. Without the hope of him beside her sometime in the future. There weren't sobs, just a steady flow of tears soaking into a pillow, as dreams of a better future melted away.

Chapter 2

Some people who smoke can stop at the drop of a hat and never look back. Some people who drink choose to put the alcohol away and never get it out again. I guess a person can choose to not eat sweets. Why is it the thought of not eating sweets brings to mind questions like, 'but what about ... birthdays? But what about ... Christmas? But what about ... Easter?' Are these my excuses for why I make changing my eating habits so difficult?



Avery breathed the early fall air as she made her way from the car to A&R Advertising. The company had grown in the five years since starting and yet, the quaint brick downtown building continued to suit her needs. She stood on the corner taking deep breaths, closing her eyes for a moment. This was her success. Thoughts of Paul's betrayal didn't need to follow her inside. She opened her eyes and looked at the historic building. When the decision to rejuvenate downtown had been made half a dozen years ago, this building, once known as the Dawson Exec, stood as a symbol of how all downtown could be. The brick had a deep tone, making the cream corbels stand out. Matching wood veneer framed the tall windows. Old wrought iron benches placed in front beneath skinny oak trees offered respite from the summer sun.

Avery walked into the lobby and crossed to the single elevator that usually worked. She pushed the button for the third floor and waited for the doors to whoosh open. A little bounce, and machines she had no idea of how they worked pulled her from the lobby to the

third floor. The doors whooshed open again, and Avery stepped into her piece of the American dream. The back wall of the reception area had the same type brick as the building façade. An ancient wood desk painted cream stood out as a friendly welcome to customers. The wood floors nicked with age creaked as she stepped across the room, but she didn't have the heart to cover them completely in carpet. The faded pattern of a small oval rug was her concession. The seating area didn't have a lot of room, so the pale green couch with Victorian flare suited the space. The two stuffed side chairs flanking the couch were more along the lines of what most men appreciated.

To the right of the reception desk, a hallway led to four offices. She and her business partner, Rexanna Dunning, had the two larger offices. Interns shared the smaller one where three desks and a tall bookcase filled most of the space. The fourth room was reserved for client meetings. The bank of windows poured light into the room. Clipped pot lights hanging from industrial wires shone overhead. The large oval table and chairs didn't leave space for much more.

Avery checked her watch. Thirty minutes to their first meeting. She glanced into the conference room and frowned. Presentation boards covered the table. She picked up the nearest one. "Riley," she hollered.

Riley Pete, their intern from Community College, peeked her head through the door.

Avery lifted the image on card stock. "These aren't Mr. Berkeley's."

"We overscheduled the conference room. Corwin usually has three board members with him, but Mr. Berkeley's on his own, so I set his things in your office."

"Good plan. Can't complain if we have too much business." Avery continued down the hall to her sanctuary. Riley had set up the three easels. Her office wasn't huge, but the space was sufficient for a small meeting. She walked to the window and leaned against the frame. Oak leaves filled her view. Green oak leaves, although tinges of color threaded along the edges of some of them.

She breathed a moment of pause before the bustle of work. Her mind sought to speak something, but to whom? What to say? "It's a

beautiful day even with a broken heart." She frowned. Was her heart broken? It certainly felt wounded a bit, but not shattered. What did that mean?

The intercom on her desk buzzed. She turned to face the day.



The elderly furniture maker maintained the poise of a younger man. Avery greeted him at the door, shaking his hand. He offered a firm, dry handshake and smiled as he looked her in the eye. Avery smiled back. "Pleasure to finally meet you in person, Mr. Berkeley."

"Thank you, dear. My son thinks this will be good for business. Of course, he should have come if he wanted to make the deal."

She led him to the first easel. "I think we can convince you as well. Let me show you." The first easel showed a loft with a comfortable design focused around Berkeley's traditional pieces. "We can change the ad copy—I wasn't sure of the correct names for the pieces."

He stopped in front of the second easel, frowning. "The edges are blurred."

"It indicates a film medium."

He held up his hand. "No commercials. I refuse to stand in front of a camera and shout or pull any other silly stunts. Ridiculous practice." His voice lowered to mumbles.

Avery grinned. "No homegrown commercials. Yours is a boutique company. You design unique, heirloom-quality furniture pieces." She tapped her finger on a wooden chaise lounge. "The lines are elegant and with the wood grain, no two pieces will be the same. This is camera-ready art."

He fiddled with his tie. "You see all that in my work?"

She nodded. "I'm not the only one. Your son chose well by having you come to the meeting. Let me show you what else we can do."

Mr. Berkeley seemed attentive as Avery showed the last of the easels. Once they completed the short tour around her office, she led

him to the leather armchair across from her desk. "Tea or coffee?" She motioned for him to sit.

He rubbed his hand against the whiskers covering his chin. "Water's fine. There's more to this than I expected."

She poured a glass of water at the shallow bar beside the window. After handing him the drink, she crossed to her desk. "There are only sixty-three days until the holiday season officially begins." Avery lifted the calendar on her desk and tapped the week of Thanksgiving. "We can have commercials ready to air in time for a Black Friday blitz."

"What about social media? My son keeps harping, and I have no idea how to go about it."

"Rexanna is a whiz." Her hands moved as she spoke. "Let's meet Friday next week. I'll have commercial storyboards prepped, and Remy can explain her strategy." She stood and reached her hand across the desk.

Mr. Berkeley's smile widened as they shook. "I like your style, young lady. I didn't think my son had a head for business. Maybe this scheme of his is worth trying." His smile made his brown eyes glisten. "I can't believe I'm saying this. Let's do it."

Avery shook from the excitement flaring within her. "Your showroom has gorgeous pieces. People will love visiting. Have a good day. Elaine will arrange the time for Friday."

Mr. Berkeley of Berkeley's Furniture and Electronics walked away as Avery buzzed her secretary. "Get me Riley and Stevens, and see when Remy has an opening. We'll need to discuss our newest campaign."

Elaine gave a quick squeal. "You did it?"

Avery did her own happy dance. "One of our biggest clients so far! Let's get everyone in on this as fast as we can."



"What's going on?" Remy dropped into the chair across from her desk a few hours later.

Avery looked up, pencil poised above the image she'd been coloring. "Elaine didn't tell me we were meeting."

"I've known you since grade school. So? What happened?"

"What happened?" She rubbed her hands together. "We landed our biggest client yet."

Remy pursed her lips and gave an exasperated *You know what I mean* look.

Avery didn't want to think about her broken relationship. Focusing on work was easier, but silence coupled with *the look* made her hands sweat. "Nothing important happened. Paul and I called it quits."

Rex leaned forward, remorse softening her Italian features. "Quits? Both of you because of mutual agreement? Or Paul? Because I noticed you thumbing through *Bride Magazine* last week."

Avery rubbed the side of her head. This was not what she needed. Work. She needed to work and forget she wasn't good enough for anything else.

"Hey." Remy pulled the pencil from Avery's fingers and held on to both of her hands. "There's more to you than being a savvy business woman."

"Too much more."

"Don't think like that. If Paul wasn't smart enough to value what he had, so be it. There's a Buzz for everyone. You'll find yours."

Remy's husband, Buzz. He was a complete opposite to her best friend, and yet one hundred percent dedicated. "I'm not like you, Remy. I don't need a Buzz, and I don't want one. The let downs are too hard." She pulled back and straightened in her seat. "I do want a successful meeting next Friday with Berkeley. Elaine will send you a calendar appointment; be ready to dazzle."

Remy saluted. "Aye, aye, boss."

Avery shook her head. "I'm not your boss. We're partners."

"So when my partner is ready to talk, she knows where to find me." Remy stood. "Stop keeping your emotions bottled up inside. It isn't healthy for you."



Remy was right about not being healthy. Avery touched the space bar on her keyboard and the flat screen sprang to life. She was good at her job running A&R Advertising. None of her clients seemed to think her incompetent because she wore a size twenty-four. Why couldn't her sense of worth carry into her personal life?

"What do I even look for?" She sighed, resting her chin in one hand while she clicked the Google icon. "Lose weight." One finger pressed each of the letters. Pills. WebMD. Dr. Oz. She scrolled. The results all looked familiar. Options she had tried without success. Others she wouldn't even consider. "Gastric bypass surgery." She shivered. Her doctor pushed for it, but there was no way she was going under the knife. Health risks or not. She folded her arms on the desk and dropped her head on them.

She didn't need this at work. Imagination, creativity, campaigns to complete—plenty of meaningful work to focus on. She closed the search engine. "Back to things that matter."

Chapter 3

“Where shopping is a pleasure.” Of course, it’s a pleasure, because upon entering a grocery store I am surrounded by all the things I’m not supposed to be interested in any longer. The smell of fresh-baked bread drifts from the bakery. I wonder if they burn a candle hidden in the back; surely they don’t need that much bread. The candy aisle is easy to skip, but really, vegetables and ice cream? Shouldn’t ice cream be padlocked in the back, making us feel a tad bit sleazy asking to be let in? Specialists warn us not to shop when hungry, but don’t they know that the best time to stop at the grocery store is between work and home? Most of us haven’t eaten yet.



Avery heard snickering somewhere behind her. She hunched inside her big shirt and continued to push the cart down the cereal aisle. Why couldn’t pop tarts be as healthy as Special K cereal? The heavily-preserved pastries were easy to fix and tasted decent. Not so much the Special K. Avery felt her inner self cringe as she pulled the box of cereal from the shelf. Why couldn’t she be rich and hire a full-time chef to prepare delicious and healthy choices? Or get up early enough to cook an egg and toast? The extra twenty minutes of sleep in the morning made a huge difference to her day. She dropped the box in the cart. Getting up extra early for an egg or, God forbid, egg whites and a slice of turkey bacon just wasn’t worth the effort. Lunches at the office ... easy. Remy ordered something most days. Dinners? Avery tapped her chin. There would be dinner out after

the meeting Friday, and Remy talked about doing a girls' night. How many dinners did she need? Wasn't there chicken in the freezer?

She took a detour to fruits and vegetables and grabbed a bag of prepared salad. Done. She looked at the four 2-liters of diet soda. Should she get water as well? It was getting late. She pushed to the checkout lanes.

An elderly couple in front of her worked together pulling items from their cart onto the belt. He carried a list and appeared to be double checking their supplies.

"How do you get organized?" Avery questioned them. "You make a list every week?"

"This?" The older gentleman lifted the piece of paper he held in his hand.

"We've had a Sunday afternoon ritual for years, sweetie." The older woman smiled as she linked arms with her husband. "Harry cuts out a pile of coupons while I pick a few recipes. Two shakes of a leg, and we're ready for Monday."

Avery grinned. "You make it sound easy."

"Having a partner has perks. What about you, dear? Don't you have someone in your life?"

"Me? Nobody wants me for a partner." Paul proved her inability once again.

The old woman drew her brows together and stepped closer. "No need putting yourself down." She took Avery by the hand. "You seem friendly. Smart."

The feel of the old woman's wrinkles was warm and comforting. Avery shook her head. "Men my age aren't looking for smart."

"Then you're going after the wrong men." She gave a little pat and returned to her husband's side.

Strange. Avery paid her bill and lifted her bags. It was nice, the older couple being unconcerned by her size. *Obese*. She forced herself to say the word in her head. Others had minded. The occasional giggle. A look. Avery glanced over the parking lot, but no one seemed to be paying attention to her. Why did these thoughts never plague her at work? She'd sat across from numerous clients during the day,

some hiring her company and others passing their work to another, and not once had she thought her weight had anything to do with their decision. Why did she assume shadows of mockery followed her through the grocery store? The thought had never occurred, and for once, Avery didn't have an answer.

The drive home remained uneventful. She arrived at the house, nabbed her bags from the trunk of her Yaris, and pushed through the garage door into her house. Loud grumblings met her seconds later, as a feline weaved between her feet.

"You have to let me put the bags on the counter." She looked at the gray and white cat. His ears perked, and he took a few steps to the side, allowing her to pass. Avery grinned. Permission to enter the Kingdom of Cat, granted. He returned to her feet as soon as she dropped things on the counter. "Alright, cranky beast." She picked him up, nuzzling between his ears as she walked to the cat food cabinet. His deep chest purr started when she pulled a can of wet food from the basket. He leaped to the ground, although his insistent meow meant for her to hurry.

She sighed as she placed his food bowl beside his water dish. Yup, she was well trained. She caught sight of the time glowing on the stove. Seven p.m. already? Time for her dinner as well.

Chapter 4

Why is asking for help difficult to do? We are all humans, each of us facing personal problems and issues. Wouldn't life be great if we could rely on other human beings to help us? Each of us sharing our unique talents and gifts to help everyone? I readily admit I see my being fat as a problem. There are physical issues. There are issues with the way I perceive myself, but I am not worthless. I have value. I have a voice worth hearing. I have talents that can, and do, benefit others. Maybe, I need to open myself enough to allow someone to help me.



A faint glow from dusk lit the windows as Avery tucked a leg under herself on the chair in front of the computer. She twisted a thick band of hair around her finger then moved her hair to her mouth, where she chewed on the ends as she used her other hand to type in the search engine. Weight loss coach. She needed a ... somebody, she figured. "Fix these habits of mine. Send me a sign." She scrolled. Doctors, clinics. Freemont Clinic, pretty close. She clicked and made a face—old men. *There wasn't anything wrong with old men, was there? Surgery. Not the trail for me to follow.* She went back to the results page. Stan Fischer. No initials or doctor label in front of his name. A layperson? He couldn't work, could he?

She clicked on his link. "Not old." The headshot showed a square-faced man. Dark curly hair and a roman nose added a look of distinction. His was a friendly face, although he'd probably never give her the time of day.

She was about to exit the web browser when a caption beneath the photo caught her attention. *It's not about failing; it's about breaking bad habits and learning new ones to take their place.*

"Hmm. I said the same thing." Avery scrolled further.

This isn't about a weekly meeting. It's about becoming involved in your life to help you make and achieve your goals. My background is physical therapy. Life-coaching stems from there. I'm not in an office, and I'm not part of a team. If you are interested, set up an appointment. Let's see if I'm the coach your life's been needing.

"Presentation needs help." Avery laughed. She tugged on her phone and punched in the numbers before she talked herself out of trying.

"This is Stan. Leave a message at the tone."

"Um, hi. I'm Avery Jacobs. I found your life-coach thing online. Hopefully, you're a real coach, and this isn't some stupid pickup line. Guess I should have checked before calling, huh? Uh, anyway. I wanted to get more information. Call whenever. It'll be fine." She groaned as she pressed the end button. "Smooth, Avery. Real smooth." No way he'd be calling back.

She clicked to return to the search results. Nothing unique about any of the others. Doctors, groups, medical research, a trial group using a new designer drug? "Ew, and end up with an extra toe?" Maybe getting help was a stupid idea.

She shut the computer down. The phone rang as she pushed out of the seat. She nabbed her cell and pressed talk without looking at the display. *Rexy's the only one who would call at night.*

"He-l-l-o-o-o," Avery answered using her sing-song voice.

"Was that Avery or Aviary?" Not Rexy's voice. It was a man!

"Oh my goodness," Avery jerked around, catching her foot on the carpet. She slammed her hand against the wall to regain her balance.

"You okay?"

"Fine. Yes, fine." She rubbed her sore hand. "I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"I get that all the time. This is Stan Fischer."

"Stan?" She glanced in horror at the dark computer screen. "Stanley Stan, Life-coach?"

Amusement laced his voice. "I go by Stan. Although, Stanley Stan has an interesting ring."

"I didn't think you'd call back." Avery leaned against the wall. What was she thinking?

"I am a legitimate businessman. You can check with the BBB. I also offer references."

"Terrific. I don't have references."

"Then it's good I don't require them from clients. How can I help you?"

"I want to lose weight, but what I really need is to change how I do things. Your website talked about changing habits." She covered her eyes. This was crazy. What was she thinking?

"Breaking bad ones and making good ones."

"I'm not sure how this works. Do you need insurance? Do I hire you? How do you know I'm someone you can work with?"

"I haven't smiled this much in ages. We'll be fine."

"I'm a wacky customer, and you're trying to decide if my money is worth the aggravation I'm likely to cause."

"Your money is worth it. I usually find a corner at the library for the first meeting."

"Okay. Fine. I can be off work by four. How does that work for you? Which library? How do you know I'm even in the right state?"

"Your area code is the same as mine. I used that as a clue. I'm closest to the library on Hawshorne."

"Oh," Avery chewed her lip. "My office is around the corner."

"We're close."

"Same ballpark apparently." He laughed, making her smile. Avery relaxed. "Tomorrow?"

"I think so." Stanley Stan chuckled. "Make sure you don't get to talk yourself out of this."

She breathed. "Okay. Wednesday. Four o'clock. Hawthorne Library."

"Sounds good. I will see you tomorrow."

Avery shut off her phone. Powered the thing down. "What have you done?" An appointment with a stranger at the library? To talk about her weight? In less than twenty-four hours? Talking herself out of the appointment wasn't what should cause him to worry. Talking herself into *going* to the library was the trick.



"What does one wear to meet Stanley Stan?" Avery chewed her lip as she stepped into her closet. Cute? Ugh, not really possible. Business? Might give him the impression she had some with-it-ness, but then why would she need him? She tugged at her favorite gray pants, then decided against them. Comfortable would look too much like not trying at all. "Business it is." She chose her medium length black skirt and white blouse. Okay, maybe most of her skirts were black in the range of below the knee to the ankle. Black made good business attire. She nabbed a green scarf. A touch of color wouldn't hurt.

The silver watch on her wrist showed nine o'clock. Great. Now was perfect. Come four this afternoon, she'd be undone. "I should have made a morning appointment. What was I thinking?"

Whiskers looked at her from his seat in the window. His long black tail twitched as he watched her cross the room once again. "I am *not* crazy." She wagged her finger at him, but he remained pensive. "Whatever. If I don't talk to myself, who am I supposed to talk to?"

Cup of hot tea in hand, Avery headed for work.

Chapter 5

What is the secret to making decent smoothies? I try to get the ingredients myself and store them in the fridge in hopes of helping them last longer before going bad. I buy the ninja mixer with a multitude of blades, which cut through human skin very easily. I blend the ingredients and end up scowling at something the color of puce. Drinking the color puce isn't pleasant. The stuff tastes about as good as it looks. Where is the flavor? The gentle touch of sweetness from natural fruits? What's the secret ingredient I seem to be missing?



“Change this,” Avery used the monitor pen to circle Christmas presents. “Make these something for Thanksgiving instead. Put a rush on it, and let’s shoot for the week before Thanksgiving.”

“Berkeley’s isn’t the usual Black Friday venue.” Riley leaned back in her chair, chewing the end of a pencil as she twisted back and forth.

“If he’s smart, he’ll run a special. Not much difference in the price.” She pushed, and the board slid across the table. “Good job on these. I like the clarity of idea.”

Riley blushed. “Thanks.” She shoved from the table, gathering the pieces of cardstock to herself like a mother hen after her chicks.

Avery laughed to herself as the young woman rushed from the room, “Glad I’m not an intern.” Her stomach growled. She glanced at her watch. Three thirty-two. No wonder she was hungry. She opened her desk drawer and lifted a box of granola bars. Suspiciously light. She flipped the box, and nothing spilled out. “Great.”

Three thirty-two. Why did the time seem to matter? She looked at her watch once more, then her calendar. Nothing more today after Stevens and Riley's meeting. Stevens. Stanley Stan. Oh, crap. What happened to today? Avery fumbled for her purse and shoved her feet into the low pumps. "I'm going to move to Florida and wear sandals every day." She rocked her feet down into the shoes, wincing. Her heels were still a bit sore. *Libraries probably required shoes, you'll have to put up with hurting heels.*

Hungry and butterflies were not going to mix nicely.

"I've got a meeting around the corner, Elaine."

"With who?"

Avery waved at her without responding. The elevator doors swooshed closed as her overly familiar secretary shrugged. One of the first floor offices housed a small, but expensive, café. She reserved making purchases as a last resort, preferring cash in her bank account to the uppity selections offered. Time was short, and the library would not allow her to take a sandwich among their collections. "Fruit smoothie it is."

"Don't trust 'em. Especially if you notice a lack of fresh fruits and vegetables." The man ahead of her smiled.

Avery pointed out the obvious. "The whole back has fruit stacked against the wall. And those red things some people try to con you into thinking are fruit, but they are decidedly not fruitish." He looked familiar.

"I see your point. They may make real smoothies here."

"What do they use if not real fruits and veggies?"

"Flavor and corn syrup."

Wait a minute. Was he Stanley Stan? "What are you having?"

Mr. Square Jaw and Curly Black Hair smiled like they were old friends. "You have to promise not to tell. I'm supposed to be this health nut guy, but I have a soft spot for powdered tea mixes."

Avery raised her brows. "Powdered tea?" Did they still make that?

"I know, my drink is supposed to be acai-infused green tea, but this place makes an amazing steamed milk chai."

"And hot chai is most always powdered."

He shrugged. "I use plenty of vitamins to make up for the nutritional value stolen away in the process."

Avery laughed. "You're weird. I like it."

He glanced at his watch as he picked up his order. "I should have a client waiting. Hopefully, I'll see you again."

Sooner than you think. "What will you tell them is in the cup?"

"I doubt she'll ask."

Her turn. "Hawaiian smoothie, add protein." He was gone by the time she turned around.



Mid-September in Georgia still felt hot, although the edges of leaves were beginning to turn, proving fall would not wait long. Avery kept close to the trees, blocking her back from the sun. Sweat-lined blouse on arrival was not today's to-do list. He seemed nice. Possibly even more than nice, although he would have better taste in women than herself. Still, a friendly man added a touch of sparkle to any day.

Except for today when she would have to tell Stanley Stan why she wanted a life-coach. "Of course, he can tell you're fat by looking at you. He did not seem blind." Maybe. He did miss the table stacked with plant material. She could have said something at the time. Her steps slowed as she approached the entrance to the library. "Get in there, Avery Lee. Suck it up."

WEIGHED DOWN

Chapter 6

Stan drummed his fingers against the armrest of the library chair. The latte cooled enough to drink, and he savored a sip. Waiting to meet a new client had him on edge. She found him on the web. That's a first. His other eight clients had come through word of mouth. This would put him up to nine. Hold onto them, and he'd have a decent income.

He checked his watch. Few minutes to go, if she were on time. Which, based on their conversation yesterday, could be doubtful. Flighty, but in a way making him want to laugh. As long as she wasn't another Jennifer. He shuddered, then looked up. The woman walking into the library looked familiar. Funny coffee shop girl. Woman. Who should try making her skirt a bit shorter because she had a great pair of legs.

Wait a minute. She chewed her lower lip. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. Office around the corner, just like the coffee shop was around the corner. His lips twitched. She'd known who he was. How could she know? Oh, yeah, photo on the website. Clever girl. She wanted him to help her lose weight? He watched as she walked across the library. Her weight wasn't what people would notice first. Yes, she could lose some pounds, but he wouldn't have thought about her weight if she hadn't said something first. Her dark hair touched her shoulders and had the slick look most women liked these days. Bangs made her face seem smaller, out of proportion with the rest of her.

She got close enough they could speak without raising their voices in the not too crowded library. She rubbed her hand against her black skirt as though she were nervous, but the glint in her eye said she was about to have a bit of fun ... at his expense. Miss Jacobs

was not Jennifer, and he had a sinking feeling this one could do more damage if he wasn't diligent.

Chapter 7

I have never been considered the skinny girl. I was chubby as a child and carried my weight over into adulthood. The adorable baby with pudgy arms and legs gets coos and pinched cheeks from elderly grandmas. Pudgy arms and legs get nothing as an adult. I look at some of the school pictures from elementary and wonder why I was considered fat back then. Maybe life would be different if the idea hadn't plugged itself into my head at such an early age?



“Look there, we stopped at the same place.” Avery moved her cup forward, showing off the insignia. “What did you get?” She tried hard not to smile, but couldn’t pull it off.

He opened his mouth once, shook his head, smiled back at her, and lied. “Green tea with a shot of acai.”

“Is acai even a real thing, or did somebody make it up and get all of us to buy in? Wouldn’t we have learned about it in school if it were really a fruit?”

He stood and offered his hand in greeting. “You must be Avery Jacob. Stan Fischer.”

“Hi.” She shook his hand. He returned to his comfortable, leathery, stuffed chair and bid her take the one beside him. Probably caked in sweat having never been cleaned. Some things shouldn’t be touched. Promising herself a soak in the tub later, she sat. The way the chairs were set made facing him difficult, so she folded her legs and sat sideways, leaning against the arm instead of the back.

He handed her a white folder. Quality material, but not even a logo? "You need to work on your presentation." She glanced up. "I'm sorry, advertising," she patted her chest. "The mind is always thinking how to get companies to put their best foot forward."

"Hmm. Maybe you can help me with that. If you open the folder, you'll see I'm a legitimate businessman."

"What's your role as a life-coach?" She glanced at the pages but was more interested to hear about his job from him.

"I help people set goals and teach them how to achieve them. Working little steps to lead to bigger steps."

"Never had a coach. Do you stand on the sidelines yelling or cheering?"

"Depends on what you need, although I prefer not to be the cheerleader. What are you hoping to achieve?"

"Well, I know I need to lose weight." She began to twirl a strand of hair around her finger. "I mean, obviously." She made a face. "Doctors all seem to want to resort to surgery." She deepened her voice, "Take care of the problem before you become diabetic or get heart disease."

"Fast fix. Why not give their way a try?"

"Yuck. They cut you open and take things out that shouldn't be out. I'm a firm believer in not jumping out of a perfectly good plane. I think the sentiment carries over to not cutting open a perfectly healthy body." She shrugged, looking down. "Well, not perfectly healthy, but you get the point."

"I think I do. What do you want to do instead?"

"Uh, your name came up on the Google search, so I figured you'd help. New habits?"

"Breaking the bad and making the good."

"I know I should be able to do this on my own, but I can't. I thought I could hire someone to help. Uh, learn. Teach." She frowned. His job would be to teach, right?

"What you're asking for isn't a short-term fix. We're talking six months, at least. Having me as a life-coach, I'm going to ask you to

do things you don't want to do. Share things you don't want to share. You will probably hate me."

She leaned closer. "Wow, are all coaches this motivating?"

"Ha. You know this process isn't an easy one or you could do it on your own. Are you really prepared and willing to tell someone else to make you into who you want to be?"

She chewed the end of her hair for a moment. "I have to if I want change to happen."

"There's a contract in the folder." He leaned across the space separating their chairs and pulled something from the back of the folder. He handed her the paper. "I'll walk you through it."

The man knew his stuff. The contract listed step-by-step and dollar-by-dollar. Contact could occur any day and any time. He could ask any question he wanted, clients could refuse to answer, but he didn't advise they do so.

"You'll need a journal."

She wrinkled her nose. "I have to write what I eat and stuff?"

He shook his head. "Think blog on paper. The way we journaled old school. I don't have to see the journal, but research shows personal reflection, venting, visualizing, and recognizing progress—these things make a difference."

"Never thought about writing down my thoughts, but I guess so."

"If you haven't had a physical in the past year, get one done. Make sure there's nothing going on to complicate your progress."

Avery chewed on the end of her pen. "You're going to want me to join a gym."

"Wouldn't hurt, but there are lots of other activities to do around here."

"If you say so."

A few more minutes, and they were done. Avery promised to call if she had questions. Otherwise, he'd give her time to decide what she wanted to do. A pleasant handshake ended the meeting forty minutes after starting. Stan stayed, she walked away through the monitors making sure she didn't steal a book. Late afternoon looked

the same. The folder fit in her purse, sadly enough. The purse was a monster. She pulled it close to her shoulder. Stop walking on rabbit trails. What about the life-coach?

Was it possible to feel different, yet nothing be different? *Avery Lee, you're going to be a star.* a voice from the past whispered, but she let the memory float away on the evening breeze. A few more hours at work would put going home after the five o'clock traffic cleared. Realistically, traffic lasted four to seven. She shook her head. "You are a loony toon today, girl."

Chapter 8

Stan Fischer stood at the edge of his deck, waiting for the adolescent Doberman to return the third item Stan hid in the yard. A set of keys, news magazine, and slippers. The large ring of keys and magazine lay at his feet. Slippers were proving more elusive. Or Popeye the Doberman reverted to puppy. The slipper dangling from the dog's mouth looked worse for the wear as he trotted to Stan and sat on his haunches. The silly creature grinned, holding its prize. Perhaps Miss Helen didn't wear slippers.

"Drop." Stan motioned with his hand. Popeye obeyed instantly. "Good drop."

They returned to the house. Stan paused beside his phone, pressing the power button to glance at the main screen. No calls. No messages. No texts. "Miss Avery Jacobs has not called." He scrunched his brows together. Popeye did not seem overly impressed ... or concerned.

Stan turned off his phone. Avery was seeking help, and he could help her, but his interest wasn't about the money. His current list would suffice another eight months. The four involved in physical therapy kept him current in his degree field, as well as constantly seeking new methods to help. Two athletes, a rising star in the world of worship music, and an elderly woman learning how to manage on her own. How would he fit Miss Jacobs into the mix? Popeye barked.

He rubbed Popeye between the ears. "I can't wait until Helen is ready for you, too, bud. No need for her to worry once you take control of the house." He turned in his office chair and used one of the gestures Popeye knew. Keeping his focus on the clients he had

would be wiser than worrying about the one who couldn't make up her mind.

Chapter 9

I love green beans. Fresh or canned, boiled or sautéed, I think they are the best vegetable, and I could eat them every day. I hate Brussel sprouts. They look like heads of lettuce but taste like lima beans. Guess I'm not a fan of limas either. How can one become adventurous with vegetables? Should I be trying a variety of things I've never cooked or tasted? Of course, cooking poses a real problem. How does one cook vegetables one has never tried before? I look online, but some of those recipes are weird. Like, I-could-end-up-with-soot-on-the-ceiling weird. Don't want that to happen. Ever again.



Sunday afternoon she didn't feel any better. A hundred times she'd decided to go for it and ninety-nine times she'd changed her mind. She was going for it, right? She needed to call and let him know, either way. It would be the responsible thing to do. Avery opened the folder. Stan Fischer's business card remained neatly tucked on the left side. Under the card, he'd written a different number. What was the point in having business cards if you didn't include the number you wanted people to use? "He isn't expecting a review of his business plan, Ave. Call and let him know." What? It would be a surprise to her as much as to him. She sighed, switched on her phone. Each number made a little beep as she pressed her finger against the screen. The glass thing needs to be cleaned. She put him on speaker.

"This is Stan."

"Hi, yes. This is Avery. Jacobs. We met last week at the library."

"I remember." Dog barking took a moment. "How's your weekend going?"

"Fine. Nothing exciting." She chewed her fingernail. What was her choice going to be?

"Did you have a question for me?" He prompted at her silence.

"Yes. I mean, no. No questions. I've been going back and forth about how hiring a life-coach would help."

"You could turn your statement into a question. How can hiring a life-coach help me? I'm glad you asked, Avery. I can help you set goals, prod you into doing the things you need to do but don't necessarily want to do right now. Help you figure out why this is a big issue for you."

"Being fat's a big issue because I can't get a date or keep a boyfriend."

"The woman I met should not have problems dating. Did you recently go through a breakup?"

"Yes." How could he tell?

"Did he tell you he left because he thought you were too big?"

"Of course not. He said he wasn't interested in me anymore. I believe a man should be interested in the woman he dates."

"Were you completely in love with him?"

"Yeah, I think." Just because she thought he was bland, didn't mean she didn't care about him. Did it? "I mean ... I would be if he'd been willing to love me back."

"Are you hoping you can lose weight and win him back?"

"Win Paul back?" She leaned against the counter. "I don't want him back, he isn't trustworthy. Besides, if I lose weight I'm doing it for me, not for anyone else."

"That's my girl. Why do you want to lose weight for you?"

"I'm tired of thinking people are snickering behind my back or thinking I don't have enough to offer in a relationship. I'm tired of not liking who I am." What possessed her to admit not liking herself? She wasn't one of those girls walking around with low self-esteem. Was she?

"Why not give me a shot? We can plan for six months, see where you are then. Of course, you can end things before then if you find our arrangement isn't working for you."

She closed her eyes. "Alright, I'll hire you. Take my 'yes' now before I talk myself out of it."

"Yes, it is. Baby steps. Fill in the questionnaire in the folder and send it to me. Or better yet, we can meet, and I'll pick it up."

"Check. Complete questionnaire. Tomorrow's Monday; are we going to meet that soon?"

"If you have the questionnaire completed. We already know I'm close to your work."

"Right. Of course, work. I can give it to our secretary. You'll get it from her."

"The questionnaire asks private questions. How about I collect the paper from you?"

"There are benches in front of the building. I'll meet you at lunchtime."

"Bring a sandwich, and we'll discuss your plan for change."

She agreed. For good or bad, her life would be changing. She hung up. Change was good. Right?

Chapter 10

"When you said bring lunch, I didn't know you meant a doggy bag."

Stan turned as Avery sank beside the Doberman, rubbing its head between her hands. The dog's tongue lolled from the side of its mouth as it whipped its tail against a bench.

"Upstaged by a dog. I feel special." He teased, leaning against the light post. Popeye sank to the cement and rolled onto his back, presenting his belly for a rubbing. Avery obliged. Stan shook his head. "At this rate, I'll never get the thing trained."

"Trained?" Avery stood. Popeye jumped up and sat beside her. "Is he a police dog?"

"He's meant to protect another client of mine. Keep her company, get help if need be."

"He's a Lassie?"

"His name's Popeye. He'll be trained to push an alarm."

"I need one of those. Something to push an alarm when I don't do the things I should do."

"You'll be easier to train than a dog."

"Ha. That's what you think." She held a folded paper toward him. "My questionnaire."

"Thanks." He folded it again and tucked it into his back pocket. "I'll add the information to your profile later. Did you bring your lunch?" He motioned to the bench.

She raised a brown paper bag.

Stan sat, and Popeye placed himself between the two of them. There shouldn't be any sense of disappointment. Jennifer taught him not to get involved with his clients too deeply. Avery was a client. A friendly, pretty client carrying a huge chip on her shoulder.

"Is this how you spend your day? Going from one client to the next? Do you try to see all of us in a day, or do you schedule by the week?"

"Each client is different." He took a bite of his ham on rye. "What did you bring?"

"Peanut butter and jelly."

"Seriously? A kid sandwich?"

She looked down at her hands. "I use whole-wheat bread."

"I haven't had a PB and J since elementary school."

She took a bite. "You don't know what you're missing. Peanut butter's good on just about everything."

"True." She was cute, but he had no business noticing. "What first steps do you want to start with?"

"Your dog."

"Not happening."

She sighed. "Whiskers would never speak to me again if I did." She looked at her watch. "I have to go. There'll be clients this afternoon."

"We'll set up a meeting when you have more time."

She drenched the dog in more affection before returning to the building. For some reason, as he watched her walk away, her size didn't matter to him.

Chapter 11

This is a test of the emergency broadcast system. Had this been a real emergency ... okay, perhaps this is an emergency. Hello, journal. My name is Avery Lee Jacobs. I am twenty-nine years of age, and I have a homework assignment. Hear me sigh. What's a good way to begin a journal about losing weight? How about the top ten reasons I hate being fat? Sounds reasonable, so let's see if we can come up with ten.

Number ten. Counting backward because they do it on the Letterman show. Number ten, the cutest clothes in the stores are normal or small. Okay, this probably is not going to be in any particular order. I guess I can put a star beside the reason I think is the best ... or would that be worst? If I hate something the best, it's the most I can hate ... or is it if I hate it the worst? Yeah, rabbit trail. Alright, number nine. I hate being fat because people look at me funny. Number eight. Clothes don't fit nicely. Too much like number ten? Being fat seems to cost more money. Buying food, plus size clothes are more expensive. Number seven. Number six, guys don't like me. I don't like me either. Probably shouldn't say "don't like," but I guess it's true. Number five?

Number four, sometimes I have more energy than my body. I can't balance on skates or ice skates. Of course, I don't know if I could skate even if I was skinny. Falling might hurt more if you're skinny. Stay on target, Avery. Number three, or were the skates number three and I'm up to number two. I hate the way I look. Maybe that should be my number one reason I hate being fat? Number two can be, I feel guilty when I eat something I like.



Avery closed the journal. Health risks should be in there somewhere. "Negativity is depressing, Whiskers. Don't ever get fat, cat." Whiskers deemed her worthy of contact and nuzzled against her as she sat at the desk. Or maybe he could have been hoping to sit on the journal while she still wrote. She narrowed her gaze at him. That would be more like her cat.

The office in her house had a bay window. Whiskers jumped from the desk to the window seat and enjoyed browsing through the small plants growing in trays. Avery gave a push to spin her chair and watched the four walls roll by. Her stomach was about to tell her it was time for dinner, so she set out for the kitchen.

What was in the fridge? A bag of chicken tenders from the deli at the grocery store, along with leftover potato salad. Cranberry sauce to dip the chicken in. The clock on the microwave read quarter till eight until she punched thirty seconds to heat up the chicken. Where had the day gone?

She fixed a tray, including a spoon and a floral napkin. Her ice tea tumbler had a butterfly engraved in the glass.

Good thing Stan hadn't told her to write down her meals. This one, she would have left off the cranberry sauce. On the list, not her plate. After the microwave beeped, she dumped the chicken fingers onto the plate and fixed two glass bowls to hold potato salad and cranberry sauce. She moved to her favorite chair in the living room, sat and managed to balance the tray on her lap. She flipped on the TV to the news, grabbed a piece of chicken, and took a bite. The tender was made using real chicken, but it was also battered and fried. She looked at her tray. No way that added up as healthy.

Baby steps. Meeting yesterday. Journal today. Tomorrow she would diet.

Except she wouldn't. The food in the pantry wasn't diet food. She should finish up what she had and then focus on a real diet, or her life-coach could focus, and she could get by.

Chapter 12

Two weeks. You'd think the woman would put some sort of effort into making use of his services. Stan swung a stick across the yard, watching Popeye chase after it. Though night had fallen, lights in the yard let him train Popeye through the shadowy distractions. The mutt was fast. Unlike Miss Jacobs. She needed a push, had hired him to do the pushing. Time to break the silence and get the woman on her feet. Popeye retrieved the stick. Stan slung the ruler-sized stick in a different direction then pulled his phone from his back pocket. He opened the list of contacts and pressed her number. Next time they crossed paths, he'd get her image. For the phone, of course. Popeye arrived carrying his prize as the phone rang. Stan used the hand signal to tell the dog to return to the house. The dog dropped the stick and bolted for the back door.



"Hello?" She answered on the third ring.

"It's been a few days, how are you doing?" He heard the phone fall, then something close to juggling. He waited.

"Um, hi." Avery recovered. "I'm fine. Good. How are you?"

"Ready for cooler weather to arrive." He sank into one of the outdoor chairs on the deck. "Did you decide to take advantage of your life-coach?"

"Advantage?" She made a choking sound.

Maybe his words hadn't come out correctly. "Are you going to hire a life-coach?"

"Well, yes. I thought I already had."

He smiled, imagining her twisting her hair and chewing on the ends. Probably a nervous habit of hers. "What have you done so far?"

"Not a whole lot. I've been waiting for direction. I did get the journal, started writing inside."

"You know since you have a life-coach, you can call and ask questions? Get advice?"

"Me? I thought you'd schedule meetings or something."

"I can if you want."

"I do meetings all the time."

"What do you want to happen first, Avery?"

"I don't know, Stan." She copied the tone of his voice. "I guess diet?"

He chuckled. "You sound thrilled by the idea of a diet."

"Oh, yes. Bland, tasteless food makes me giddy."

"Meet me for a cup of coffee." Phone conversations were overrated. "I've always believed face-to-face is the better way to get things done."

There was a moment of silence. "Denny's is the only place I know would be open. Other than bars, and I'm not into those sorts of places."

"Me neither. Denny's it is. I'll see you in fifteen." He should not be smiling. He should not be making plans to meet someone close to ten in the evening, at Denny's no less. Stan checked the rear-view mirror before backing out of his driveway. Part of being a life-coach meant getting friendly with his clients. Friendly, not involved.

Chapter 13

Pictures of grilled chicken salad in menus never look as good as the bacon cheeseburger dripping in mustard and mayonnaise. Which is weird, since the chicken salad costs more, so one would think making the image the more appealing choice would benefit the company. But even pies look better, and creamy milkshakes in frosted fountain glasses with swirls of whipped cream and a cherry on top — don't get me started on those.



Stan had a people-person charm to him. Avery watched the waitress perk up. Not in a flirty way, but a human-be-kind-to-human way. “I can see why you make a decent coach. People respond to you.”

“God-provided talent.” He said sincerely.

Avery nibbled a bit of crust from her slice of apple pie. “How many clients do you have at a time?”

“Eight seems to work well for me, and everyone else. Depends on the level of engagement. I also teach as an adjunct at the community college, in case you’re trying to figure out the math stuff.”

“You can do, and you teach others to do? Impressive.”

“Trust me, teaching others to do is infinitely more complicated.” Stan took a bite of his cherry pie.

Me being case in point. Avery sipped hot tea. “What are your thoughts on diet?”

“You ask as we’re enjoying a slice of pie?” His smile told her he didn’t mind the two of them eating a slice of pie. “A crash diet can

have short term results. Some people are able to take pounds off quickly, but are they able to keep the weight off?"

She made a face. "I'm familiar with the yo-yo theory. What other choice is there?"

"One part is eating the way you should. You'll lose weight slowly, but in the interim, you can learn which habits make for healthy eating."

"What's another part?"

"Movement."

She groaned. "I was afraid you'd say exercise."

"You don't like being active?"

"Being active isn't the problem. I don't have several hours a day to spend at the gym."

"Normal people don't. Thirty minutes to an hour four times a week. But there are plenty of other ways to be active."

"Spinning around on my desk chair probably isn't one of them." Too bad, because twirling in her chair she had perfected.

"No, but I think I'd like to see. We'll start small. I'm going to give you a homework assignment. I know I said you wouldn't have to write what you are eating, but I do want you to write about how you are eating. Try to describe five eating habits."

"Good or bad habits?"

"Yes."

She frowned. That wasn't a real answer.

"Don't worry." He pointed his fork at her.

She was tempted to parlay. Maybe when she knew him better, if they ever became friends. "When is my homework assignment due?"

"We could try to meet Thursday. Sooner if you like, hopefully. Let's not wait another week."

"Okay. Sometime this week, among all the other meetings I have."

"Stop making excuses. The sooner you start, the sooner change happens."

"Thank you, Stalin. I mean Stan." Her eyes got big. Did she just say that aloud? His smile grew, and his eyes twinkled. Yeah, she

did. "Hopefully, the rest of your weekend won't be filled with pesky clients."

"Haven't been bothered yet."

There was something pleasant about the way he said things. Avery pondered their discussion as she drove home.

Chapter 14

A lack of planning may unconsciously be my goal in life. If I don't plan meals or prepare snacks, I have a ready excuse to head to the grocery store or the local Walgreens to get supplies and anything else I may be craving at the time. Lately, it's been powdered donuts. I'm not even a fan of powdered donuts; why am I craving them? This is ridiculous. Tonight, I was in the mood for frozen pizza. We joke and say pizza has all the food groups, but we know it isn't good for us. How do people manage to plan an entire week of meals? Do fresh fruits and vegetables last all week long? Can you keep fish or chicken in the fridge for a week, or do they need to be frozen? How did I get to be nearly thirty and not know answers to these questions?



Avery pulled the stainless-steel door of the fridge toward her. She knew what she would see but insisted on looking anyway. *The fridge was empty. Okay, not empty, but devoid of dinner. Wilted lettuce and mushy tomatoes did not a meal make. No quick-fix meal. I should have stopped at KFC.* She closed the fridge. A peek at the freezer didn't do much better. *Not even a frozen pizza?* What had possessed her to change? She needed something to fit her life. A life-coach wasn't the right choice. Sure he was cute, but she didn't make enough money to pay someone to sit around and be cute.

Avery paced the length of her kitchen. She hired him, what, a little more than two weeks? End this now, and go back to the way things were. She pulled out her phone.

Quitting would mean what? *Failing to lose weight.*

She scrolled down to find his number.

Failing to find a boyfriend who would accept her as she was.

Pressing the number.

Hopefully, the ringing will go to voicemail, and I can leave a message.

Failing at her goals.

"Hey, what's up?"

Drat the man. Why did he have to pick up?

"Avery?"

"Yes. Me, hi. How are you?"

"I'm great. You called me."

"I did. I called you." She closed her eyes. "I don't think this is going to work. There's not enough time in my day. I can't seem to get the process working right. And it isn't about you." She rushed when she heard him try to cut into her tirade. "You're wonderful. I'm not cut out for change. Obviously, you can do amazing things for most people. I'm not worth wasting your time and effort." She had to take a breath. And why did she cover her eyes with her other hand? He couldn't see her through the phone.

"Two weeks isn't giving yourself much time to make changes."

"I don't have time for changes."

"What are you doing right now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Right now, are you talking to me?"

"Yes." Uh, duh?

"What else are you doing? Where are you standing?"

"I'm in the kitchen."

"What's wrong with the kitchen?"

"I forgot to get ingredients for making dinner."

"So what's wrong with the kitchen?"

"There isn't stuff to make dinner." Maybe he was slow?

"Tell you what, meet me at Vinnie's, and we can discuss this."

"Vinnie's?"

"Vincent's."

Oh, Italian, really?

"Trust me."

She hadn't said anything, so how did he know? "Struggling."

"Trust me anyway. Half an hour gives you plenty of time to get there."

"Fine." What was she thinking? Wait, she wasn't. She didn't feel irritated anymore. Why not?



She wasn't boring. Stan hung up the phone. Jumpy. Neurotic. But not boring. It was only Tuesday. What had happened between Saturday night and today? And Vinnie's? Wasn't that kind of like taking a drunk to a bar? He'd stayed away from Italian for years until Vinnie convinced him otherwise. He would do the same for Avery.

Popeye rested his head on Stan's leg as he sat in front of the computer. "I know I told her she could quit anytime, but she needs to, at least, start first." He shut the machine down. "Maybe we'll use a play date with you as an incentive." The dog wagged his tail, a happy grin on his face. "Yeah, but you still belong to Miss Helen." Popeye barked. Bonding sessions were working, he recognized the name. "Christmas, buddy. She'll be all yours." And maybe Avery would be his. Wait a minute! Where had that come from? Hopefully, by Christmas, they could be friends.



He had a strong jawline, making her want to trust him. *Not helping, Ave*, she chastised herself. How could she fire him if she enjoyed his presence? She tried to calm down her smile. "Don't tell me Vinnie's your uncle."

He held the door open for her. "Not a relative. I enjoy his cooking, though."

Really? Pasta and bread?

He grinned at her. "All a matter of perspective. He uses fresh ingredients."

Her stomach growled. "We're here, and I'm hungry. What do they have?"

They stood a moment. A tall, dark Italian and his well-groomed pencil-thin mustache, curling on the ends, greeted them. The waiter nabbed two menus and led them to a small table near a wall mural of Italy. Stan waited for her to sit before sitting himself.

"They already know no bread. Easily my downfall."

"You?" He surprised her. "You don't have to worry about what you eat."

"I don't worry about what I eat because I've trained myself to make good choices."

"Took years, though, didn't it?"

"Breaking bad habits takes a minimum of twenty-one days of determination. You have to understand, Avery, it isn't about making a bunch of changes and poof, perfect combo. You have habits you need to break, habits you need to change, and then a few new ones to add."

She groaned. "Sounds like work. What's good for dinner?" She opened the menu. There were two pages. The left side was a permanent page.

"Those are the regular choices." Stan tapped the top.

The right side had a handwritten list of specials slid behind a plastic sleeve.

"Do you like chicken?"

"Yeah." Did he appreciate her enthusiasm? She almost smiled.

"Grilled chicken masala is a winner. The special includes a vegetable lasagna, very fresh."

"Seafood?"

"The shrimp dish. Big ones mixed into grilled veggies and fresh tomato."

"You own stock here, don't you?"

He laughed, a pleasant sound lifting her mood. "I should, I eat here enough."

They placed their order, and he took a long drag at his iced tea, then asked, "How often do you eat with people?"

The question took her by surprise. "What?"

"How many meals in, say, a week do you eat with other human beings?"

"Sometimes Remy and I manage a meal together at work."

"This week?"

Had they eaten together this week? She couldn't remember. "I'm single. I don't have family. Most of my friends are married and have families of their own. It's not like I can spend each night at a different house."

"Do you think because your meals are just you, planning isn't a priority?"

"It's hard to cook for one." Sounded like an excuse.

"No." He shook his head. "Works the same way as if you were cooking for four or six."

"Too much food."

"Leftovers. Lunch or another dinner."

Their meals arrived. The plate wasn't huge. Six good sized prawns with a variety of squash and tomato. As steam rose in the air, she smelled oregano and garlic.

"Fresh parmesan?" The waiter hovered holding a hand-cranked cheese grater.

"A little, yes. Thank you."

Stan's meal looked just as delicious, and healthy. Maybe this was a decent place to eat.

"Mom taught me to pray over my food. I hope you won't mind."

She placed her fork back on the table. "Not at all."

"Lord, thank You for the way You provide. Thank You for time spent getting to know new friends. Help us in our goals. Bless our food, may it provide the energy to accomplish all things in Your name. Amen."

Different sounding prayer from the Lord's prayer. Avery took her first bite and melted at the rich flavors.

"Good, huh?"

She closed her eyes and moaned. The meal progressed, and Avery forgot she wanted to fire the life-coach. He entertained her with stories.

She missed this, having conversation and eating a real meal with a real companion. *Don't think like that, Ave. You know single is best.*

Dinner was over, but Vinnie's had a front parlor and a variety of board games. Stan invited her to stay, and they took up a table at the window. Stan pulled a game from a shelf and set the box on the table. She read directions in the lid while he prepared the game.

"The green cards go in that box." She pointed when he tried to set the two stack of cards beside each other.

"Stickler for rules, ay?"

"Rules are good. They help people win."

"We'll see." He graciously allowed her the first roll of dice.

Several rounds into the game, something seemed different. "You cheated." Avery laughed.

"Did not."

But his little smile—she was beginning to realize the look meant he'd done something. "You distracted me and moved something on the board."

"That wasn't a distraction. I merely pointed to the odd gentleman wearing a top hat and tails."

"Right."

He pointed to the man that had just walked past their window. "I wonder if he was invited to a mad-hatter party?"

She shook her head, looking for another move on the board. "He was trying on his favorite suit and hat to be sure all of him would fit in the casket."

Stan burst into laughter. "You are morbid. He was on his way to a wedding."

"Not much difference." She snorted, then slapped her hand over her mouth.

He laughed at her, a pleasant, friendly comradery. "Getting to know you will be interesting at the least."

"What about at the most?"

"Life changing."

She wasn't sure how to respond.



How could anyone think that getting to know her would be life changing? She hadn't fired him, instead had agreed to meet him for dinner on Friday and fix at least one meal in the interim. Taking a photo as evidence. Stan the Man was a charmer. Life-coach but not dating material. *Which was too bad.* She groaned and fell across her bed. Shut up, head.

WEIGHED DOWN

Chapter 15

The Cooking Channel makes cooking look easy. Pictures in recipe books make cooking look fun ... and delicious. How is it different people can mix the same ingredients, and both get different results? What do some people know that the rest of us remain clueless about? Is there a secret method or ingredient not included in the directions making the difference?



Wednesday started with a bang. Actually, a flash of lightning followed by a loud rumble. Avery rolled over and buried her head beneath the pillow. The sound of thunder continued to jar her nerves. A grown woman should not be afraid of thunder. She knew thunder was the sound made as air crashed into the void created by lightning. Lightning was the danger, not thunder. It didn't stop her from hiding beneath the covers. Another good reason to stay single. Irrational fears.

She hid until the alarm sounded. Fall wasn't the usual time for storms. Must be a change in the weather. Georgia had been unseasonably warm so a bit of thunder and lightning to bring in cooler weather would be okay.

She meant to make a grocery list, hit the store on the way home, and cook the meal Stan wanted to see. But the storms played havoc with the computers, and she stayed until nearly nine o'clock fixing the proofs for customers. A box of pizza landed on the conference table, and Avery didn't hesitate to take a slice. An hour and two slices later, she stared at the third extra-large slice dangling from her hand.

This wasn't what she wanted. She returned the slice to the box and walked back to her office. Two slices were plenty. She wasn't hungry.

By nine, she was too tired to stop at the store and uncertain they remained opened late. Were grocery stores twenty-four hours like Walmart? She rubbed her arms as she crossed the street to her car. Cool had come. The air had a crisp fall flavor as October loomed a few days away. It was about time.

The next day, Avery knocked at Remy's office. She poked her head through the door. "I need a recipe. Something easy to cook for dinner with ingredients I can pick up on the way home."

Remy looked up. "You want to cook actual food?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not really, but I promised Stan I would cook a meal by tomorrow. Which leaves me tonight to finish my homework."

"Stan? You didn't say you were dating again." Remy's face lit with excitement.

Avery held up her hand. "I'm not dating. He's a life-coach. You said I should get help. I got help."

"Doctors help. Who's this life-coach? What kind of experience does he have?"

Avery laughed. "You're as bad as your mom. He's a life-coach. It's a legitimate business, insured and everything. We signed a contract."

"If you went to a doctor, insurance would pay."

"Doctors are boring, and they want to cut you open."

"Stan's not boring?"

Avery kept her breathing even. If she allowed her cheeks to get red, Remy would go nuts. "He's helping me learn better habits. If I can lose weight and keep it off, maybe I'll find a boyfriend who sticks around."

"Fall in love?"

Avery offered a benign smile. The world was short on people who would love her. "Recipe? Something easy I won't mess up?"

"How about baked chicken? Get Shake 'n Bake. Roast some potatoes."

"Shake 'n Bake?"

"Don't you remember the commercials?" Remy deepened her Georgia drawl. "It's Shake 'n Bake, and I helped."

Oh, yes. She'd been accused of having a similar accent, but she didn't hear it. "Sounds pretty easy."

"Want us to join you?"

"Not this time. It'd be different if I was making chili. Tonight, I don't know if it'll work out, and all I need is a picture to show that I tried."

"Don't forget vegetables. I'm pretty sure you can manage to cook a bag of green beans."

"Chicken, potatoes, and green beans. Shake 'n Bake for the chicken." Short grocery lists were the best.

"I'm glad you found someone to help you."

"Me too. If I listen to his advice, I might lose weight."

"More importantly, learn that you're awesome ... no matter what."

"You *have* to say positive words, you're my best friend."

"It's true. You aren't thirty yet, and you have a thriving business. That takes brains and courage."

"Speaking of business, I need to get back to mine. Thanks. I'll text a picture of how it turns out."

She made sure to leave the office mid-afternoon. She drove by Berkeley's main warehouse on her way to the store. A banner hung in the window. Her design for all the world to see. The sight put a smile on her face, and she determined to keep it there while she shopped. The name of the store had become so common, its misspelling no longer stood out. Focusing on the few ingredients she needed kept her from tracking the aisles she shouldn't frequent. She left carrying four items in the bag. No donuts. No ice cream. Dessert would have been nice. She looked back at the entrance. No. She kept her feet moving toward the car. Dessert did not need to be a nightly thing. Maybe fresh fruit, but not now. Going back to the store would result in something other than fruit.



Not too bad, Avery smirked as she took the picture. Green beans were always a good choice. The baked chicken looked a little rubbery, but chicken usually did, right? Roasted potatoes cooked a tad too close to the top element smoked up the kitchen but were actually tasty. Friday would be good.

She set her tray, selecting a fuchsia napkin and a glass of ice water with a squirt of lemon juice. She moved the tray to the coffee table. Whiskers followed, but she glared when he tried to jump beside her dinner. "Enough of that, you."

She pressed the TV button, arranged the cushion behind her back, and waited for the news to come up. Depressing news, not what she needed for dinner. She clicked on the guide and scrolled to her favorite home and garden channel. The brothers were on. Avery decided that they would make good company for dinner. She tossed the controller beside her and started in on the food.

She really did eat just about every meal by herself but hadn't noticed until Stan said something. It wasn't fair. How could she control whether or not she had company when she ate? Things hadn't been very different while she dated Paul. Dating had never turned into building a life together. *What would it be like to build a life with someone? Sharing more and more meals? Making plans together? Holidays? Remy always made sure she had somewhere to go on all the important days. It would be nice to have someone for the not-so-important days.*

Chapter 16

Good eating habits means staying away from tasty foods. That can't be true, can it? Millions of healthy people in the world get by on tasteless foods? So what makes a good eating habit? Not eating after 7 p.m.? I've seen a rule somewhere. Filling up on water.

Bad eating habits, now there's something I can get myself into. Chocolate cake. Or ice cream. Both of those are bad habits. Giving in to the munchies in the afternoon. Fast food. Oh, goodness, why can't McDonalds be healthier and be part of good eating habits?



Why did I eat it? It was a piece of cake. Three layers of chocolate cake, creamy icing, and chocolate sprinkles on the outside. Not necessary for a Friday night, and not sitting well once eaten. So ... why?

Avery felt sick because she wanted another piece and found herself looking for an excuse to return to the grocery store. She paced the kitchen. Thursday's dinner turned out good enough to count. She'd managed no dessert last night. Tonight was a totally different story. What was wrong with her?

Without giving herself time to think, she turned on her cell phone and hit the speed-dial symbol Stan had programmed for her.

"What's up?" His voice had a strong baritone rhythm.

"Uh, hi. How are you?"

"Are you planning to fire me again?"

"No."

"You sound stressed."

"I ate a slice of chocolate cake, and now I'm craving more. I don't know why I keep doing things to sabotage myself. I don't want to want cake because I know it isn't part of a healthy diet, and there was absolutely no reason to go by the bakery and pick up a slice." She took a breath. Had she unloaded on him? He was so running away.

"What were you thinking when you stopped at the counter?"

Why did he ask questions to get her thinking instead of reacting? It was good, but sometimes she wanted to hear him tell her she was crazy. Beyond help. *Some people could say 'what were you thinking' in a tone of voice assuring you that you're a failure. But not Stan. His tone sounds more like thoughtful reflection.* She wanted to cry.

"What were you thinking?" He repeated.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember. "I thought it would taste good for desert. I'd been doing well, so I refused to listen to the voice inside say otherwise."

"You shut down your inner voice?"

"I guess I did."

"If you could go back, what would you tell yourself?"

"Don't."

"Does saying 'no' ever work?"

"Since I give in every time, I guess not. This whole thing is pointless, isn't it? You're going to regret taking me on."

"Have you ever tried flying with your super power?"

Avery stopped pacing. What? That was an odd thing to ask.

"These huge leaps you make—it's like super powers."

"What leap did I make?"

"You turned having a slice of chocolate cake into a recipe for abject failure. It was one slice of cake, right?"

"This time."

"Are you sitting down? I'm going to say something that might knock your socks off, and I don't want you to trip."

Pest. "I didn't realize people still said 'knock your socks off.'"

"I do. Your predilection for cake is most likely due to an addiction to sugar. You starve your body for a few days, have a taste, and then the cravings begin."

"How do I break a sugar addiction? You can't not eat sugar ever again ... can you?"

"It would be difficult. You need to learn ways to satisfy the sweet tooth—healthy choices, with better nutrition than chocolate cake."

"Diet Jello? Please say no diet Jello."

His laugh washed over her like a warm blanket. The pleasant sound caused a tingle in her spine. "Not much nutritional value in diet Jello."

"Thank God."

"Tell you what, I'll bring something by your work tomorrow. The first alternative to chocolate cake. How do you feel now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You sounded anxious and upset when you first called. How do you feel now?"

"Hopeful? Like maybe I can do this?" She slapped her forehead. "Don't know why I can't do it on my own."

"Because God made us social creatures, and it helps when we can carry each other's burdens."

"Is it hard being a life-coach and getting drawn into so many lives?"

"Most of my jobs don't feel real personal. I'm a key footstone on the path to success."

"Do you mind when things get personal?"

"With you? Not at all."

"Aw, you're gonna make me blush, Mr. Fischer."

"I'll see you at work tomorrow, Ms. Jacobs."

"Bye." She was smiling. A nudge of excitement at the thought of seeing him tomorrow. The feeling of angst was no longer present.

"Let's clean this mess up." She started running water in the sink and loaded the dishwasher.

Chapter 17

He didn't mind getting to know Avery on a personal level, he realized as he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. Most of his clients involved physical therapy three to four times a week. They were guys who talked sports. A woman in her mid-twenties recuperating from surgery, but nothing made him want to get to know her better. Helen was a dear woman in her seventies, but he spent more time training her dog than he did helping her. Maybe Avery needed him more at this time. As she improved her habits, she'd call less and feel less likely to meet up with him when he suggested it. The thought did not sit well. He pushed up from the chair.

Walking to the kitchen, he thought about choices for dessert. Fall meant apples. Losing weight meant using natural sweeteners, not artificial. He made a choice, chopped the apples from the crisper, mixed them in a dish and placed dessert in the oven. Thirty minutes later, the kitchen smelled like cinnamon. He looked at the disposable carton he'd placed on the counter and then at the glass dish used to cook the treat. If he gave her the dish, she'd have to return it, right?

By morning, using the dish seemed environmentally sound. It was the right thing to do. He placed it in a bag.

The flower shop on the edge of historic downtown caught his eye. Mom said flowers were good for all occasions. Which probably meant distracting sugar-crazed women. He parked the car, entered the shop, and was drawn to a small container holding white lilies. Perfect. Nothing too pushy or flashy, just a touch to lift the spirits. Mood modification was part of the life-coach job, right?

Her building was another block over. He chose to walk rather than move the car. Customers bustled through the first-floor café. Cooler

weather brought an increased desire for coffee. He sidestepped those who were milling in the open area and headed for the elevator ... which wasn't working today. He took the stairs. These old buildings did it right. The stairwell had as much classy style as the rest of the building. Framed art on the wall at each landing. Italian tiles on the steps and treads. Glossy wood banister wrapping its way upward. He arrived at the third-floor door and entered A&R Advertising.

Avery Jacobs was a legitimate business woman. He wanted to whistle along with the sound of Bach piped in through the common area. The woman sitting behind the massive desk offered a welcoming smile. The desk wasn't a metal monstrosity or modern marvel, but a classic he might have seen in his grandfather's library.

"Good morning. May I help you?"

He read the plaque on the desk. Elaine Wolf. "Good morning." He raised the bag. "I have this for Avery. Ms. Jacobs."

Elaine looked at something on the calendar in front of her. "Mr. Fischer?"

"That's me." At least she used his real name.

"Avery said you could go to her office. She's on a call but should be okay in a minute."

"Thanks." He looked at the hallway. "Down there?"

"Second door on the left. It'll be open, you can't miss her."

He did not miss her. She stood at the window talking, although there was no one else in the room. She wore heels, which accentuated the shape of her calves. Not bad for a woman of her size. The shorter skirt worked. He knocked on the frame of the door, making sure his eyes were focused on her face when she turned around.

Chapter 18

What is it about fall that brings out the foodie in all of us? It doesn't start with Thanksgiving; it starts with pumpkin spice latte. And pumpkin spice donuts. And pancakes. And Cheeps. Really? Weren't those just for Easter? When did the bombardment of fall flavors turn into a pumpkin?



"January and February are slow months. Valentine's is the first big push of the year but not really your market. Spring cleaning, vamp up the yard work. We'll prep for the home and garden showcase." Avery walked from her desk to the window and back to her desk. The clip in her ear allowed her to listen to the conference call and monitor the numbers on her computer.

Someone knocked at the open door, and she turned around. She noticed Stan's curls first and waved him in, making a gesture at the phone clip in her ear. Hopefully, he'd understand. "I'll talk to the marketers at the show, see if it's affordable. You should hear back from me by Thursday."

"I never thought about the garden show."

"I've seen your work. A display could do wonders. Let me run the numbers and get back to you."

"Thank you, Miss Jacobs."

The line went dead. Avery clicked her earpiece off and looked at Stan.

"Sorry about that." She smiled. "Wrapping up a call." Stan looked distracted. What was wrong? She looked down. Pumps, black hose. Not what she normally wore, but she'd done a presentation earlier.

"Nice legs."

Two words and her normal presentation suit seemed ... swanky. She brushed a hand through her cinnamon-colored hair and crossed the room back toward her desk. Her skirt brushed against her knees. Hmm ... she hadn't noticed that before.

He placed three lilies on her desk next to a small container. "What are these for?" She touched the tip of a white bloom.

"In case you were still feeling down. Mom's a firm believer flowers brighten every mood."

"Your mom's a smart lady. And the box?"

"Apple bake. My special dessert option one. You can count on fruit for a healthy, sweet treat even when you want more than a raw apple.

"What did you do to it?"

"A touch of maple syrup. Cut the apple into thin slices, drizzle with syrup, cook half an hour."

"How can this be good for me?" Through the clear lid, she saw wedges of apples baked in a gooey brown sauce.

"Try keeping ingredients natural. Simple can be good."

"Thanks." She drew her finger across the cookware. "Can I heat it in the microwave?" she smiled at his nod, took the lid off and sniffed. "Mm, wow! I guess I can get a jar of maple syrup to fit in the fridge."

"You should purge your fridge before buying anything more. Cabinets too. Get rid of the old gunky foods and make way for fresh and simple."

"More than time to get rid of things. I think I've had the same sugar sitting in a Tupperware container for two years."

He made a face. "A cleaning party it is, then. How about I visit Saturday and lend a hand?"

"Are you sure? This will be your first trip to the house."

"I'll be helping you clean out bad habits so you will be able to replace them with good habits. Are you ready for change?"

Avery nodded. "Sounds like a plan. I'll see you Saturday."

Chapter 19

Purging is good for the soul ... as long as it isn't by using internal cleansers. Ick. The pantry and fridge— those areas are full of bad habits and poor choices. And potato eyes that have sprouted leaves. If I'm going to do this right, I need to purge the things that keep me turning to bad habits so I can make room for the things that will increase the use of good habits. Easy enough, right? So, do I keep the sugar or get rid of it?



This is probably not what Stan was thinking. Avery sliced the pool noodle in half. She lifted the shorter side, about the length of her arm, and it bounced a little bit when she swung it through the air. She took a deep breath, aimed, and slammed the pool noodle against the juice bottle. It didn't matter the bottle crashed on the tile floor, cracking the lid, allowing purple liquid to spread. The next to go was a jug of honey. Within moments, Avery found herself swinging the noodle-bat wildly, making the variety of sweets and good-for-nothings jumble across the floor, splintering over the counters. For the first time in her life, she allowed a sound of pure anger driven by contempt to scream from her mouth as she pummeled a box of Little Debbie's.

"What are you doing?"

Avery stopped, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. Her mouth hung open. Stan was here?

"Are you alright?" Abject horror described the look on his face.

Avery felt something bubbling up inside herself. "I feel awesome!" She did, even with goo covering her. She could feel

her hands were totally sticky. Her face had to be red, and she was breathing hard. Her arms felt like she'd completed a workout. She looked around the kitchen area. It *was* a workout. Broken bottles, mutilated bits of food, jams oozing from the counters into globs on the floor. What had she done? The kitchen looked like a hurricane had swept through. It had. Hurricane Avery. And it felt wonderfully, exuberantly exhilarating. She began to shake. Not from any sense of delayed shock but from laughter. It burst from within, louder and deeper than the screams. Tears streaming down her face and the look on his face only drove her further.

"You're crazy." He struggled not to smile, but Avery noticed his shoulders shaking.

"I am. I have completely fallen off my rocker." She had. It took moments, but calm restored itself. Even so, glancing at the inventive mess, there was no sense of regret. "I feel as though a battle's been fought."

"You look like it's been lost. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I ..." How could she explain? "I'm light inside." She giggled as she turned and viewed the entire room. "Yes, there is a mess to be cleaned. I'll probably have to hire Stanley Steamer; I don't think I'll be able to get the juice out of the grout."

"You should get it out of you first." Stan surprised her. He swooped across the messy floor and lifted her up in his arms.

She squealed. "Put me down! You can't carry me."

"What do you call this? Besides, there's glass on the floor. You're fortunate not to have cut yourself already."

It wasn't far to the main bathroom. He placed her in the tub. "Where are your towels?"

She stared for a moment. He carried her like she was a normal-sized woman. She pointed to the hall closet without moving her eyes. "There."

He returned a moment later, bringing towels and a dress he must have seen hanging on her door.

“Shower. Quick. Be sure to put shoes on. You have a mess to clean up, young lady.” He left the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

He carried her. Like a normal, romantic, hero-type person. Like she was a normal person.

She faced the mirror, and her jaw dropped. “Oh. My. Goodness.” There was no way he would think she was normal. Goop in her hair. On her face. Her clothes. Bare feet. What had she been thinking? She turned the water tap to a pleasant mixture of hot and cool. Her clothes needed to be rinsed as much as the rest of her.

Chapter 20

Stan rubbed the back of his neck as he stared at the mess in the kitchen. The noise he'd heard while standing at the front door had terrified him. He'd have broken through the door if necessary. He certainly hadn't expected to run into a kitchen being demolished by a crazed woman swinging a pool toy. He laughed. Crazed indeed. Like an Amazon woman battling her enemy.

He stepped to the sink, looking for a sponge. His khaki pants probably would not survive. He looked at the jumble of things on the counter and floor. She'd taken everything out of the fridge and cabinets, placed them on the counters, and attacked. He'd be smart not to cross her. Who knew what she might do.

He began to wipe the remains from the counter onto the floor. Her look, the moment she realized she wasn't facing her demons alone. Horror, and then the glow of victory. There was the tinkle of glass hitting the tile floor along with a few thuds. Pretzel bits bounced. He looked at the row of upper cabinets lining the wall, shook his head, rinsed the sponge, and wiped. He searched the cabinet under the sink and found a bottle of kitchen cleaner. She was going to need a bigger bottle.

"You don't have to clean up my mess." Avery slipped into the room.

No longer covered in goop, she wore sweats and a raggedy T-shirt, a better choice than the dress he'd seen on the bedroom door. She'd stuck a pair of tennis shoes on as well. He tilted his head. Something was different. Her hair. It was wet, and she'd pushed it back with a hair thing. Whoever told her bangs were a better look for her hadn't been right.

He raised the bottle in one hand and a roll of paper towels in the other. "I don't think you have enough towels."

"There's a Sam's pack in the shed. I believe in always being prepared for a mental breakdown."

"This is definitely a breakdown of monumental proportions. Get the towels." He sprayed the first cabinet and wiped.

Avery returned with two rolls of towels and a broom. "I should get as much of this stuff up as I can."

"You could sweep it into the middle while I work on these."

She didn't seem to mind him giving directions. A tune whistled from her lips. It took him a moment to recognize the song. Snow White's "Whistle While You Work." He had to laugh. When he looked at her, he noticed her eyes twinkling as well. No regrets.

"Let's try this." Avery grabbed a large dustpan from the closet and handed him the broom. "Push it onto here."

He did. "Next time, your plan should include a tarp for easier clean up."

"I have rid the house of junk food."

"No." The shaking of his head started her laughing again. "You've merely smeared it into uselessness."

"Unless you're a dog," she gasped, trying to drop another load on the dustpan into the trash. "Did you ever see the commercial with the white kitchen where the dad and daughter build a volcano, and it splatters over everything?"

He nodded. "I think the TV kitchen was able to be sprayed down. I doubt bringing a hose in here is what you want to do."

"Can't do much worse."



Hours later, Avery lounged in her favorite chair by the fireplace. She held a thick ceramic mug in her hand. The warm tea soothed her parched throat. Stan had stayed for several hours to help her clean the mess she had made. It was a lovely thing for him to have

done. Unnecessary, but lovely. She sighed. What had driven her to the bout of destruction in the first place?

“I don’t want to be controlled by food. Not anymore.”

Food was one vice you couldn’t live without, she’d always told herself. A smoker could stop, and drinkers could put the alcohol away. “How is being a food addict any different?” She watched flames flicker across ceramic logs. She didn’t have to buy junk, didn’t have to give in to sweets. “You can live on healthy food.” She tried to reassure herself. “You just have to learn to make it taste great.”

Chapter 21

What do people do with the hours of the day that aren't filled with work? I guess the better question is what do I do? Watch TV? Read a book? A book is good, but not very active. The idea of going for a walk—or heaven forbid, learning to run—isn't what I want to do. But there has to be more than what I'm doing. Are there active hobbies? If I engage my mind creatively, maybe I won't focus on food as much?



She needed a hobby. Avery looked at the popular craft store logo looming above the double doors. Craft stores weren't her thing. Ordering colored pencils and art materials online worked best for the advertising campaigns. The door slid open, and she entered.

Busyness rolled over her. She grabbed a shopping cart, something familiar to hang on to. The first few aisles involved colorful paper and stickers for all occasions. Her phone had a camera, but recording life events wasn't really her style. Scrapbooking wasn't for her. The next section was stamps and colorful pads. What would she use it for?

Not until she came to easels and art paper was her attention sparked. Drawing was interesting. She made rough sketches for storyboards before they were modified by computers, but had never considered drawing for fun. She picked up one of the art pads. Vellum paper? What was the difference? She felt the thin sheet. Choosing a different pad, she found something that felt like normal paper. Placing the art pad in her cart, she faced the wall of colored pencils. Much better quality than Crayola, they even had pastels. She selected two boxes showing a variety of colors. Packages of drawing

pencils and erasers hung to the right. She added some of those to the cart.

She looked at her collection. Now, she needed something to house them all. Wood crates were several rows back, but she wasn't sure she wanted an open container for Whiskers to play in. The aisle at the end held decorative boxes, some lids came off, and other lids remained connected on one side. Her attention was drawn to an Eiffel Tower box. The Paris theme had a cream background, slate-drawn print and images, and a few touches of red. She opened the lid and made sure the art pad would fit. Perfect.

She gave the other side of the store a look. Fabrics, sewing machines, something that looked like a sewing machine but had four needles and lots of string to tangle. Not for her. Silk flowers were pretty. Wreaths hung on the side wall. Fall colors, who would have thought you could match flowers with the changing color of leaves? She found one boasting large blooms in orange, yellow, and cream on a twisted grapevine wreath. A sleek brown ribbon twisted around the wreath and formed the bow at the top. She held it up. It would look good on her front door. The forty percent off sign made it feasible. She placed it in her cart before changing her mind.

A wedding section? She rolled her eyes and kept going. Nothing else captured her attention, so she headed for the checkout lane. The lady in front of her was using her phone, holding it to the cashier.

"What's that?"

The older woman gave her a smile. "Coupons."

"How do you get those?"

The two of them helped her type in the name of the store and find the coupon. A measure of success enveloped her as she exited the store. Shopping went much better than anticipated.

Chapter 22

At some point, if I am going to be successful at losing weight, I need to develop the skills to watch my numbers. Calories, carbs, proteins, vitamins, and minerals—these are all important aspects of food. The right mix of numbers has positive results. The wrong mix of numbers has negative results. It is actually quite straightforward. If I approach meals scientifically, looking at the numbers, can I still create meals that have flavor and satisfy those aspects of self that go beyond nutritional values? What exactly are those aspects of myself? That may be a question to focus on in the future.



The cleaning company worked wonders. Nearly a week later, Avery walked into the house, and it still smelled like lemons. The grocery bags pulled her arms down, and she rushed to the counter for relief. Her phone rang as she pushed the bags far enough they wouldn't fall on the floor. No need for another mess. She pulled her phone from her purse as the final ring silenced. Stan? He was calling her? What did he want? Had something happened? The fiasco last week, he decided she was a nut case and wanted to close the contract. Or carrying her across the house threw his back out. She pushed the call button.

"That was fast." Stan sounded normal.

Avery breathed a sigh of relief. "I was juggling bags and didn't quite make it to the phone."

"Restocking the kitchen?"

"Mostly cat stuff this round."

"Are you busy tonight? There's a program I want to show you."

"Not busy." She began pulling cans of cat food from the bag. "I'm making an omelet for dinner. The extent of any plans."

"Breakfast for dinner is an awesome idea."

"Why not join me? Omelets are my specialty. Um, possibly my only specialty."

"I will if you don't mind. How does forty-minutes sound?"

"Like I need to get the groceries unpacked and find my slippers so I can get to work on dinner."

He laughed. "No bare feet?"

"Only when I'm on a rampage."

"Go find your slippers. I'll see you in a bit."



Avery had the egg mixture whisked and the secret ingredient in place by the time the doorbell rang. "Hey. Come on in." She turned and walked back toward the kitchen. "I've got Havarti, okay for you?"

A moment of silence, and then the sound of feet shuffling after her. "Havarti?"

She turned around. "Cheese, for the omelet."

"Spicy or mild?"

"Mild and creamy makes it nice for omelets."

"I trust your judgment."

She snorted. "Your mama should have taught you better than to trust fools."

"She did. What can I do to help?"

"Set the table? Silverware's in the drawer. Napkins are in the basket there." She waved at the corner of the counter.

"Where are the everyday napkins?"

"There. In the basket."

"The fancy ones?" He held up a flowered napkin.

"Yeah, I like the way they look."

"Flowery napkins it is." He gave her a lopsided grin, which made her stomach twitter.

She was hungry. It wasn't the man, she reassured herself.



The omelets turned out perfectly, Avery noted with a smile. The pressure of a visitor hadn't even caused her to fumble. Clean up was easy, and she could hear Stan getting the computer running as he chatted to the cat.

"I don't recall meeting a cat my first time here."

"Probably because my tantrum sent him hiding beneath the bed."

"Wise creature."

Avery wanted to laugh at the scene as she entered the office. Stan sat at the computer desk. Whiskers jumped up beside him, the cat's intense look focused on the strange man, like a royal demanding fealty. "He's harmless unless you get between him and his catnip toy. There have been issues." She giggled. Whisker's ears perked up.

"Hello, cat." Stan narrowed his eyes, offering the feline a serious glance. "Yes, you are beautiful, but I am here to help your mom." He waved his hand. "Move on."

Whiskers raised a paw and batted at the movement.

"Hey," Stan growled. "I did not give you permission to use nails on me."

Laughing, Avery swept Whiskers into her arms. "Poor Kitty. The mean man doesn't want to play. He probably doesn't even watch 'Animal Planet.'" The last sentence caused a rift. Whiskers leaped to the ground and sashayed in the opposite direction, his long tail twitching in the air.

"Don't worry, I'm easier to get along with," Avery assured as she looked at her computer monitor. "What's with all the charts?"

"An interactive nutrition website. See this?" He pointed at a sliding scale. "You can set your calorie intake."

"Ugh, I didn't want to count calories."

"The main purpose isn't to count calories. Check this out. I had hot oatmeal for breakfast and a cup of coffee. All I have to do is click those items, and these come up. It's more about learning the nutritional value of foods we eat. See the carbs?"

"Not much in the way of protein." Avery noticed another bar.

"There's also fats, vitamins, and minerals—more information than the total number of calories eaten in a day. You don't have to focus on the calorie section. What did you have for breakfast?"

"Uh, buttered toast, and I put low-fat cream cheese and sliced almonds on it, and a diet coke. Oh, I also cut up an orange."

He clicked the foods she mentioned and the nutrition bars moved. "See? You have more protein in your breakfast."

Avery pointed around him. "And vitamins and minerals. I think I beat you."

"Not a contest."

"Uh-huh. How long do I do this for?"

"Try a week?"

"A week?" Avery gave an exaggerated moan. "Stalin, you're killing me."

"I'm sure you meant Stan since that's my name."

"But Stalin suits you every once and a while."

"I think you should meet someone who appreciates my efforts appropriately."

"Oh, I appreciate you." She let her tone express how much, although the urge to snicker softened the sarcasm.

"Helen is coming to my house Tuesday evening to carve a jack-o-lantern. Join us?"

"Is she another client?"

"She is, though I can't say much about her. Come over Tuesday."

Was she a younger woman? Did she have a weight problem or was it something else? Could it be a woman he was interested in?

"Is that a maybe?"

Avery refocused. "What? I've never carved a pumpkin."

"Never? Not even when you were little?"

She shook her head.

Stan grinned. "Then consider this an assignment. New experiences are good for you."

"If you say so. Alright, Tuesday. What time?"

"Any time after three-thirty."

Three-thirty? Was she a teacher? Oops, back to Stan. "I'll make it work. Tuesday afternoon, carving lessons."

He stood and turned the desk chair toward her. "Play with the program. Give it a few days, a week would be best. See what you learn. We'll discuss next week."

Avery sank into the chair, leather still warm from Stan's body heat. *I should not be noticing things like this.*

"I can let myself out. See you Tuesday."

She should have invited him to play a game. Something. Avery listened to the front door open and close with a firm thud. He could be interested in someone else. Inviting him to hang out wouldn't be appropriate. *Like he would be interested in you, goofball.* He seemed friendly, which was nice. It would be beyond foolish to expect anything more.

Chapter 23

Mixing clients was not his standard operating procedure. Privacy issues precluded group sessions. Yet he'd invited Avery to Helen's carving party. Hadn't intended to, but the offer slipped out without much thought. He'd have to check with Helen, make sure she didn't mind. Popeye would enjoy the small gathering. The golden retriever loved people.

Friday morning, Stan woke with a start. The unsettling dream slipped away as consciousness rallied. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Still an hour until the alarm would sound. Well, no going back to sleep now. His slippers scraped the wood floors as he padded to the kitchen. The Keurig already had water. He selected a Brazilian brew and pressed the lever for coffee. Ninety seconds later, he carried his ceramic mug into the office and sat at his desk.

The machine whirled to life. Only five messages. AJWhiskers? Avery Jacobs? Wasn't her cat named Whiskers? He clicked on the email.

Stalin, you are an evil man.

He raised his brows. What had he done?

I entered chocolate cake and coffee ice cream into the program. They don't have good nutritional values. Apple baked in maple syrup? Not half bad. Please, please, you're gonna have to give me more recipes for good desserts.

The woman had an odd predilection for sarcasm. But instead of coming across unpleasant and irrational, it was kind of cute ... or he needed to get out more. These two days teaching a short course at the community college would help.

He decided to respond. *Avery, my evil plan is working. As I sit rubbing my hands in gleeful victory, I continue to plot the destruction*

of the world. Until then, don't get bogged down by numbers. There is a difference between awareness and obsession. Be aware, check when you aren't sure. Don't obsess. Too often leads to unhealthy behaviors.

He read through the other emails until the alarm sounded from the rear of the house.



The physical therapy workshop was full, twenty-eight participants. Only half were college students, the others practitioners seeking recertification hours.

"You're more patient with the kids than the last instructor."

Stan looked up at one of the students, Tammy something. "I remember those times too vividly."

"May I join you?"

He scooted to the end of the bench. She was a pretty woman—slender, wavy brown hair pulled back in a clip. "What clinic do you work for?"

"Private practice. I help athletes get on their feet faster."

"Is faster always the best plan?"

"If they want to make money. They get paid big bucks to take care of their bodies."

"Your equipment must outshine the college's."

Her sleek smile suggested she read into the comment something he didn't intend. "Well, this place isn't cutting edge, but it is convenient, and we get treated to interesting presenters."

She was trying to flirt with him, but Stan didn't find her all that attractive. Not like Avery. Wait a minute, where'd that thought come from? Avery was a client. She could be a friend, but he needed to stay focused on the main task.

"You should visit the clinic." Tammy gave a wide smile. "I'd be interested in your input on equipment arrangement."

"I'm sorry. With teaching college and my other commitments, that isn't feasible at this time."

She shrugged, not overly concerned by his refusal. They continued to eat, interspersing tiny bits of conversation. Stan refused to let his mind wander in the direction it wanted to go. Avery Jacobs would possibly get a different answer.

Chapter 24

Isn't it interesting how expectations influence your attitude, even if your expectation is completely wrong? I think one thing. I don't like what I'm thinking, so I spend the day in a bad mood. I find out I'm mistaken, and I wallow in disappointment.



She felt jittery. Avery sighed as she parked the car behind a classic LTD. She double-checked Stan's address and saw the gray craftsman house. Not a style she would have thought of for Stan. Today she would learn who Stan found interesting. She wasn't supposed to care, but the idea of his being involved didn't sit easily.

The house was older but well-maintained. She followed the walkway up to the concrete stairs. They leveled off at a patio, and then wood steps led up to the porch. Boards creaked as she walked toward the front door. White pickets framed the porch supported by four columns. A swing hung to the right, and a small seating area had been set up to the left. She knocked on the wood door. Glass panels etched with a leaf motif kept her from seeing inside. She traced the outline of a bird in the stained glass beside the door, then moved her finger to the bell

The door opened in a moment, and she smiled at Stan. He wore jeans, a black T-shirt, and a sweater.

"Any trouble finding the place?" He motioned her into the foyer and showed her a hook for her purse.

"Phone maps are amazing. Is your friend here yet?"

"Helen's in the kitchen. Follow me."

Avery sniffed. The house smelled good, hints of cinnamon and vanilla mixed with something savory. Stew, maybe? He walked too fast for her to get more than a glimpse at the rooms. They ended up in a large kitchen. The bay window flanked by two other windows showed off a decent-sized yard. Plenty of light gave the room a cheery look. White cabinets, upper and lower with a soft yellow backsplash, and white appliances instead of stainless steel. What other surprises lurked in the house? She hadn't expected him to be so ... so traditional. "It's beautiful."

"I told you I had skills."

She gave him a look. "You did this?"

A chair scraped against the wood plank floor as the other woman stood. "Hidden talents, dear."

Avery smiled, and for some reason, her chest felt lighter. The older woman, much older woman, had an engaging smile. "Helen?"

"That is me." She wrapped Avery in a quick hug. "Pleasure to meet you. I'm hoping to find my talent in one of those pumpkins over there." She pointed at the stack on the kitchen table.

Avery raised her brows and looked at Stan. "We're carving all of those?"

Helen looked eager to get started. Stan grabbed a drop cloth. "Give me a hand?"

Avery followed him to the dining room. The walls had four-foot wainscoting painted white and then a pale lemon above. The chandelier over the table had a classic touch. He'd already pushed the large table to one side of the room. They grabbed the corners and spread the drop cloth across the floor. They lifted the table and moved it on top. Stan's lips twitched. "I know what you're capable of."

"Drop it, Stalin." She used a rolled newspaper to slap his arm. "What are those things for?" Avery motioned at the collection of tools on a buffet cabinet.

"For carving pumpkins."

"I thought you used a butcher knife and elbow grease."

"If you want to butcher your pumpkin. It takes finesse to make a brilliant jack-o-lantern. Cover the table with a thick layer of newspaper."

Helen walked in holding a gourd from the pile and sat at the table. "Should I draw what I want to carve first?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Avery held a butcher knife. "But what about cutting the top off and digging out the guts?"

"You want to make a mess, I can tell." He removed the knife from her hand and placed it far from her reach. "Have a seat. I'll pick one for you."

"Spoil sport." She sat beside Helen and glanced at the woman's efforts. "You're an artist. How do you make a straight line going over the bumps?"

The pumpkin Stan placed in front of her was more square than round. "Hold on," she held it up.

"What's wrong?"

"Stand there, I want to see something." She held it in front of her and eyed Stan's face. "I think it could work. How do I make a carving of your face on the pumpkin?"

"You are not carving my face."

"No, I'm going to emblaze you on the flesh of the rind." She moved her hand like she was revealing a treasure.

Helen joined in. "It could work, dear. Though you'd have to get a wig. He still has all his hair."

Stan blushed, nabbed his own pumpkin, and plopped down across from them. "Should have known you'd gang up on me."



Carving knives were sharp. Avery sucked her thumb, several choice words running through her head.

"You need a Band-aid?"

"Knife slipped."

"I noticed. You're creative. Where's your sense of flair? Surely you don't wield your creative tools this wildly?"

He teased, but then he disappeared a moment, returning with a small kit and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

"I thought you weren't allowed to use that stuff anymore."

"What stuff?"

"Peroxide. Kills healthy cells."

"Let me see." He held his hand palm up, expecting her to put her hand in his.

"Killing perfectly healthy cells." She mumbled as he cleaned and put a Band-aid on the wound. She glanced at Helen's model. "Were you in medicine? Looks like you have surgeon's precision."

"Thank you, dear." She tapped Stan's shoulder. "I'm afraid our friend may need private lessons."

The three of them laughed. Avery leaned back to view her creation. It wasn't bad, especially if you leaned to one side or held the pumpkin at an angle. "My world is off kilter, what can I say?"

Helen gave Stan a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, Stanley. You are a dear man."

Avery felt a stabbing in her chest, something akin to jealousy. Not fair. She shut the thought away and returned her attention to Helen.

"It's still light enough to drive home. Pleasure to meet you, Avery."

"Likewise." Avery felt herself engulfed in a hug. Helen smelled like cinnamon and camphor. "We can have chili night at my house next week. I'll pick you up if you don't like driving in the dark." Something compelled her to offer.

"Such a dear girl." Helen patted her cheek. Avery felt an odd sense of loss as the older woman shuffled down the hall and out the door.

"She's sweet," Avery commented when Stan returned. She tugged her upper lip between her teeth, trying not to giggle. "She also has good timing." They both looked at the mess and laughed.

Stan pulled the chair away from the table. "If I ever say 'time to drive home before it's dark,' you know to kill me."

"Her husband died?"

He nodded. "She knew nothing about banks, taking care of the house. Didn't even know how to put gas in her car. A friend referred her to me. Thankfully, she's a quick study."

"She excels at carving pumpkins, so you know she has some talents."

"More than one. She's an excellent cook. Raised five kids. Now she wants to be able to do things for herself."

"She's a good cook?" Avery gulped. "I shouldn't have invited her over for chili."

"I love chili."

"Great." Avery groaned. "Now I can have two connoisseurs putting up with my chili."

"Don't think of us as experts to impress. It's just an opportunity to be social. We'll make it another project on your list."

"Speaking of projects," Avery slipped his pumpkin around before he could stop her. "How is yours going?" She paused a moment. "You aren't carving a face." He'd created a tree reaching out with spindle branches.

His grin looked almost evil. "It'll look creepy when I put a candle inside."

"I've got to finish clearing the inside if I'm going to get a candle down there." Avery continued digging into her pumpkin. The long spoon wouldn't reach into the corners so she used her hands, allowing goop to dangle and drip from her fingers.

Stan scowled. "What is it with you and messes?"

She wiggled her fingers in his direction. A string flipped off and landed close to his hand. She made a face of an exaggerated 'oops.'

He wagged the tool at her, "Finish your carving before you are barred from my home."

Laughing, she returned to her creation. Once the insides were cleared, she could finish cutting through the eyes, nose, and mouth.

She pulled it over onto its side and glanced at Stan. He was staring at her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He cleared his throat and returned his attention to his carving.

Weird. Avery enjoyed the flutter in her stomach.



The sun had set by the time they finished.

Stan stirred a pot on the stove. "Dinner, clean up, and then we have our lighting ceremony."

Was he inviting her to stay? "Smells delicious."

"Chicken soup and rolls. Simple but tasty."

It was more like a vegetable soup than chicken, but Avery didn't complain. Stan knew how to make a flavorful soup. They sat at the small round kitchen table.

She dunked a bit of bread into the broth. "Do you hand out candy for Halloween?"

"Our church has a harvest festival out past the community center. I volunteer to help."

"No treats?"

"I make popcorn balls."

"Parents let you make stuff?"

"People we know. Want to join us? Hayride, camp fire. Billy sets up a maze in the field behind the Y."

"Sounds better than pretending I'm not at home."

"Why pretend you aren't home?"

"Teenagers." She shuddered. "The little kids are cute, I grant you. But our neighborhood has big kids wandering around. They've caused vandalism in the past. Seems easier to not be home."

"Join me, and you won't have to pretend."

"I guess that's as good a reason as any."

"You can always claim you have an awesome life-coach who has you going out to do things and meet people."

"Oh, yeah. I'll have to write a glowing recommendation." She placed her napkin on the table and stretched. "Dinner was good. Time to head for home."

"Ha." Stan fixed a stern look on her. "You don't get out of cleaning up."

"Helen did."

"She pulled the age card. You don't have one yet."

"I have to get up early for work."

He jerked his thumb toward the sink. "Put your dishes in the dishwasher."

She laughed.



It took them both to move the dining room table off the drop cloth once the newspapers were cleared away and pumpkin guts scraped off. They rolled the tarp, tucking the edges like an oversized burrito."

"You carry; I'll hold the door open. Which one you going through?"

He grunted as he held the tarp. "Kitchen, cans are closest to there."

Task accomplished, she hesitated in front of him. "What?" He lifted his brows.

"Um," she pointed at his head. "You have a bit of goop on a curl."

He frowned and dipped his head toward her. "I wonder how pumpkin guts could have migrated up there."

Trying to ignore the sensations running through her mind and hand, Avery pulled at the pumpkin guts.

Stan chuckled. "Now I know how monkeys feel."

His humor lightened the mood, and she could step back, maintaining a semblance of calm. "Now what?"

"You have accomplished your duty, so ..." He grabbed something from the counter. "Tada."

"A votive. Cool."

He grabbed the torch, and they carried their creations onto the porch. The stairs had posts perfect for display. She placed her candle in the middle of her jack-o-lantern, went through the nose to light it, and then put the square top back on. Stan fixed his, and they stepped to the sidewalk.

"It's actually kind of creepy." Stan complemented. "Looks like his face is melting."

"Yours looks alive, especially when the wind makes the flame flicker."

He turned to her. "High five. We did good."

He held his hand up, and she stretched to tap it.

"You can do better than that, Jacobs. Come on, high five me girl."

Their hands slapped together with a satisfying clap. It stung, but Avery didn't mind. "Next year I'm making a cat."

"You'll have to find a way to make ears. And a little less Dali."

"I won't promise much." She laughed. "This was fun. Thanks for inviting me."

"Don't forget our two o'clock meeting tomorrow. Progress report time. There's a coffee shop on Mannings."

"Mannings? Is that a street?"

"Behind Main Street."

Driving home, her mind turned to their meeting tomorrow. Progress report meant check writing time. He gave a lot more than what she paid for. Take tonight. Tonight made her think they were friends. Friends could be in business together, look at her and Remy. Avery glanced at the pumpkin in the passenger seat. "Should I put the belt around you?" The empty eyes offered no comment. She sighed. On the one hand, signing up for the life-coach had brought Stan into her life. On the other hand, he was being paid to spend time with her. Anything she felt toward him couldn't be trusted. It would be foolish to do so.

Chapter 25

One month since meeting Avery. Client Avery who agreed to meet him at a coffee house. It was a neighborhood coffee house. The outside looked like a house. Inside, brick walls and eclectic lighting forged the mood. The bar across the back of the main room held today's selection of coffees along with all the fixings. The bell above the door jangled as the door opened. He turned, then waved to Avery.

"You find the most interesting places."

"These downtown streets have lots of nooks and crannies."

"I've never explored beyond Main."

"We'll have to change that. Coffee?"

She shook her head. "Tea." After placing her jacket on the chair, she followed him to place their order.

"Cream, milk, sweeteners, and flavors are back there." Stan handed her a cup of hot water.

Avery selected a bag of chai and dipped it in the water. "This is good."

Stan went for cream. When he returned to the table, he took the seat across from her. She wore pants today, still black. Long white shirt and a red sweater. Most her closet must be black and white. Pity, colors looked good on her. "What do you think of your first month?"

She shrugged. "It would have helped if I got on board right away instead of dragging my feet."

"Think of it as an adjustment period. Do you find the journal useful?"

She pulled a book from her purse, fiddling with the journal in her hands. "You don't need to look?"

He shook his head. "You're more likely to stay honest for yourself." Although he was curious.

She shrugged. "Didn't put enough to make it an issue."

"You're shallow?" She wouldn't succeed if she wasn't willing to dig into the issues.

Her eyes narrowed, and her lips tightened. "I'm not shallow."

"Not you as a whole person." He reached across and placed his hand on her arm. "I find you intriguing, actually. No, when you write in the journal, do you stay shallow so you don't dig into your thoughts and ideas?" He resisted the urge to rub his thumb across her skin.

She looked at his hand on her arm and blinked a few times. "Yes. Maybe?"

Her voice sounded odd. Was she purposefully being obtuse? He slipped his hand away. "Anything you want to share?"

"I destroyed my kitchen. It cost \$288 plus tip to repair. Best bill I ever paid."

"I was there. It was a truly colossal mess." He smiled. Perhaps she had trouble digging into her motives. He could help. From what he'd seen, there was passion and a deep-welling anger.

Every pushed her hand through her hair and nabbed a lock of hair, twisting it around her finger. "My life feels that way sometimes. Most everything is smashed into pieces and the tiny parts I try to keep ahold of are going to slip away, and I won't be able to hold any of it." She moved her hair across her mouth.

He'd never seen a woman chew her hair as a nervous habit before. He crossed his right leg over his left and leaned in. "I think all of us feel loss of control at some point in our lives."

"What did you do?"

"God found me." He held his hand up between them. "I know, ultimate cliché, but true. To have prayers answered, see lives change—I have what I need to believe."

Her eyes darkened. He could read questions and fear in them before she looked down, returning the journal to her purse. He'd

never asked about her faith or lack thereof. Now wasn't the time, but someday.

Chapter 26

Some people eat when they get depressed. Others can't eat at all. For some, it's being happy. For me? I think I can eat because of anything. It's as though I'm continually trying to satisfy something with food when food isn't what that something really wants. How can that be? How can I be missing something in myself and not know what it is?



Avery sneaked a peak at Stan as she slipped the book into her purse. Something about him ... it wasn't difficult to believe he was a Christian. She didn't give much thought to God. Probably because He didn't give much thought to her. People like Stan, they mattered more. He was caring, helpful. She took a breath, enough thinking. Straightening her back, she gave a smile and took a gulp of her tea. Thankfully, cooled tea. "What's my next step?"

"How's your afternoon tomorrow?"

Avery pursed her lips. "Why?"

"I thought we'd take a field trip to Anytime Fitness."

"That's a gym."

"It is. You knew getting into a regular fitness routine would make a difference."

Avery winced. Machines drenched in sweat, germs, viruses, and who knew what bacteria.

"The gym is on a four-hour cleaning cycle." Stan's lips twitched. "They manage all of the machines. And use HEPA air filters, the ionizing kind."

Her jaw dropped. "How did you know?"

"You have hand sanitizer and Lysol wipes on the cabinet shelf in your office."

"Oh yeah." Nice of him to notice. What else had he noticed about her?

"Don't worry, it won't be as bad as you think. I have a plan for this afternoon."

"Another client to meet?"

"Nope. The plan's for you. Tell you what, what's your favorite type of food?"

Today? She thought a moment. "Chinese."

"Okay." He nodded. "Chinese can be healthy."

"Ling Buffet has over a hundred items."

"You won't find the best Chinese food on a buffet. Ever been to Young's?"

She shook her head. "Where is it?"

"In town. And I promise once you try Young's, you won't ever want to go back to the buffet."

She looked at her watch. "It's early for dinner, even by silver-hair standards."

"Neither of us are silver-haired yet. I'm taking you to Tate's first, then we can get dinner."

Tate's? As in exclusive designer wear for phys-ed junkies? "I don't need workout clothes."

"What were you planning to use at the gym?"

"Sweats and T-shirt? They're called sweats for a reason."

"Yeah, so you can get rashes in uncomfortable places. What's wrong with having something stylish and snazzy that won't get caught in the gears?"

"Nothing." She looked at her sweater and pulled a tiny ball of fuzz near the button. "Do you know how ridiculous I'll look in one of those outfits?"

"Have faith in your life-coach, Avery. I'm here to help, not set you up for failure."

"You mean humiliation."

"None of that either. Tate's has styles for all body types, petite to plus size."

"I'm not buying if I don't like." She frowned.

"Of course not."



I love it. Avery looked at the mirror and twisted a bit to the side. The workout clothes she'd seen Kate Hudson touting on TV would never work for her. This outfit included stretchy calf-length pants, black with bands of colorful flowers, and a two-tiered cap sleeve shirt. Strategic cuts in the black cover let colorful flowers show through. The sleeves and bodice fit closer, the rest of the shirt fell loosely to her upper thigh. A second set of clothes in the same style was white with hibiscus flowers underneath and on the leg bands. They were too cute to pass up and Stan the Man's glimmer made her insides flutter. That or she was hungry.

Dinner turned out to be just as amazing. "I'm never going back to the buffet." Avery hummed at the flavor of the thick-chopped vegetable patty. Stan's sweet and sour contained real chunks of pineapple, and less sauce. "Tate needed a life-coach?" Avery asked. Stan's association with the owner elicited twenty percent off. She should have gone for a third outfit.

"He wants to climb a 25K."

Avery's fork stopped midair. "You climb mountains?" He was way out of her league.

"Not me." He gave a self-conscious laugh. "Fear of heights. My role is to help him keep his feet on the ground. I keep him safe, managing feasible benchmarks."

"His wife hired you?"

"She did." He took a bite of chicken. "Tate's come around."

When dinner ended, and Avery reached for the bill, Stan nabbed it first. "I've got it."

Avery walked to the front as Stan greeted the cook. What did he mean, he's got it? For now? Did he expect her to pay him back? She waited by the glass front door, chewing her lower lip. His check burned through her pocket. A delightful afternoon, and she had to pay him for his time. Why did it feel awkward? Why did her eyes sting? She watched as he crossed the dining room, heading toward her.

"You okay?" Stan reached across, his arm behind her as he pushed open the door. The cool air swirling around them caused her to shiver. The man beside her wasn't the cause, although he stood a smidge too close for comfort to keep the distance Avery needed to maintain.

She drew the check out and waved it at him. "Here. I want to make sure you get this. Next month, I'll include extra to pay for dinner."

He stood looking at her in a way she couldn't read. She was doing this wrong.

"Great job, coach. I mean it. You're going to help me get the results I want, climb the mountain, like Tate. I'll see you later."

Was there a term for most awkward exit? The afternoon ruined because she felt the start of something for Stan Fischer. But to him, she was a job, a paycheck. Way too wrong. "Friends, Jacobs." She muttered a few times. Her phone chirped as she locked her car doors. *Four o'clock Anytime Fitness tomorrow. No excuses.*

Chapter 27

I've become too accustomed to a sedentary lifestyle. I move around, I do things, just nothing involving sweat ... or exercise of any form. That's bad, isn't it? What excuses do I rely on? I don't have proper footwear, I'm uncoordinated, people will look at me funny. I know I need to exercise to increase the number of calories I burn in a day, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. How do I write loud sigh in a journal?



Avery tried for an excuse, but her mind remained annoyingly blank. The car clock showed five after four as she pulled into the lot. Technically on time since she let her clock run a few minutes fast. She saw Stan's SUV and pulled beside him. She glanced in the mirror. "Apologize first." She gave herself a firm look before exiting the car.

"No fair. Why do you get to wear sweats?" she shook her head at him. He did look good in navy blue. The office cartoon on his T-shirt gave her an excuse to linger on his chest. Cute. She looked up. Could he tell her eyes smiled the way she could read his? "I'm sorry how I ended things last night. I'm trying to figure out how we work. I feel we can be friends, but at the same time, I pay you for your help."

"For my help, not my time."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is if we grab a bite to eat together, you don't have to worry I'm on the clock. Becoming friends isn't part of the life-coach contract. It happens because I want it to."

"With me?" She wanted clarification.

His smile made her feel lighter, awkward moment forgotten. "But for now," he clapped his hands, "you get life-coach. Let's show you how this is done."

Right. The gym. The place potentially able to change her mind about having an interest in Stan. The smoke-tinted, oversized glass doors intimidated. "This isn't really necessary."

"I have an arrangement with the company and can include three months of a gym membership as part of the life-coach experience."

Lovely. He opened one of the doors, and a funky smell of body odor masked with incense wafted over them. The gym. Words of doom echoed in her head. Memories of high school and gym class, not good. She shivered. There had been nightmares.

Her serviceable sneakers squeaked on the tiles, but the new outfit made her feel a bit less intimidated. How had he known?

He showed her the ladies locker room. "Put your stuff in this locker," he handed her a card with the locker number and code. "I'll meet you in the main room."

A few rows of lockers stood at the back of the room. "What number are you looking for?" A friendly woman with tight curly red hair greeted her.

Avery looked at the card. "310."

"Around the back."

The code opened the locker. Avery put her purse and jacket inside and slipped the card into the small pocket in her yoga pants. She took a moment to explore the locker room. Nothing like high school. There was a bank of toilets, as expected. A long counter shared five sinks and lots of electrical outlets. There was also a steam bath and sauna. Good thing there wasn't a Jacuzzi. She'd tell Stan to forget the workout. She found the exit and wandered into the main area.

She noticed grunts and the whirl of machines. A smoothie maker cranked for a moment then went silent. She looked around. The place was decorated for Halloween. Orange and black streamers

crisscrossed the ceiling. A skeleton hung from the main logo in the lobby. Uh-huh, talk about unreasonable expectations.

Stan bumped her elbow. "Not bad, is it?"

No, not at all. People were being eaten alive by machines, running and biking but getting nowhere. She gave Stan a tight smile, keeping her thoughts to herself. His responding grin told her he knew anyway. Drat the man. "Where to first?"

"Over here. I reserved bikes."

Yippee. "They have computer monitors." They looked like normal stationary bikes, but they had a large screen set behind the handlebars.

"Tablets." He handed her a short towel and draped his over one of the handlebars. She followed suit. "There's a cool app you'll enjoy." He pressed a few buttons until a map of the world showed on the screen. A number of boxes bounced, wanting her to pick. "Choose a place."

Okay. She pressed her finger on England. Four choices followed: London, Lake District, Bath, and Somerset. The line for London seemed to stay flat. Bath had a couple of hills. Lake district had doozies. Did they have mountains in England?

"Where do you want to go?" Stan asked as he mounted his bike. He pushed buttons on his monitor as well.

"Start easy." She slid her leg over the frame of the bike and pressed London. The monitor flared to life. The journey began with an aerial view of the city, zooming in on a quiet-looking street beside a red telephone box. Cool. She hopped up on the seat. "Where are you going?" She leaned across to try to see Stan's.

"We can do London together."

"Okay." Sweet man. He shouldn't be—it was proving to be very distracting.

"Get your bike going."

Oh, yeah, the fun part. She moved the pedals, enjoying the fact that technology had progressed since high school. Being able to explore the sights of London proved interesting.

"Are you at the Thames?" Stan didn't sound too out of breath.

Avery chugged her legs around. "Yeah. Just crossed the bridge." She could feel her heart beating in her chest. Good, right?

"Wait till you turn the corner."

She did and saw a huge Ferris wheel. "Wow. Look at how tall it is."

"It's the Eye of London."

"Have you been there?"

"Not yet. I think I'll plan a big Europe trip for my fortieth birthday."

"Where else would you go?" They were on a path meandering along the river.

"Amsterdam, Paris—those are on my list."

"What about Holland? I've always wanted to see fields blooming in tulips. And the old windmills."

"Yes, I'd add Holland to the list. I'd also do a river cruise through the Black Forest."

"Where's that?"

"Germany."

Their bike ride ended at Piccadilly Circus, Stan arriving before she did. "Is it really a circus? Looks like an empty town square to me."

"We'll have to find out when we go."

Avery felt a tad unsteady as she got off the bike. Her legs were weaker but overall okay. She survived the bikes. "What's next?"

"Let's work upper body." He led her upstairs to an area where the walls had a series of pulls. Resistance training, he called it. Pictures along the wall showed how to use them. "The closer you stand to the wall the less effort it takes to stretch. Stand farther away, and you get a tighter pull."

Avery stood as close to the wall as she could and still move her arms around.

"Wimp." Stan teased, but she didn't move farther from the wall.

"Small successes." She pulled, and twisted, and danced a smidge. She tried to tangle the lines, but Stan warned her not to. He was such

a spoilsport. Twenty minutes later, arms aching and legs wobbly, he offered her a glass of water at the smoothie bar.

"Next time, we'll bring our own bottled water."



Next time turned into three times that week. Each day, he showed her a different type of cardio equipment. None were as interesting as the bikes that went places.

"Download an audio book and listen while you're on the treadmill."

"There's a track upstairs. Wouldn't that be more useful? At least I'd feel like I was getting somewhere."

"The treadmill simulates hills, unlike the track."

Another good reason for the upstairs track.

He grinned. How did he know what she was thinking? It wasn't fair.

Chapter 28

What constitutes a victory? If I go a day eating only what I should, have I accomplished a victory? How about three days at the gym in one week? How does one celebrate a victory? Am I focusing on the wrong thing? This is supposed to be about changing habits. Does a week of victory mean habits have been changed? How will I know when I get to a point where I want to be?



Three days at the gym, not consecutive, and her body still ached. Maybe inviting Stan and Helen for dinner wasn't such a good idea. Or it could help take her mind off things—like her gluteus maximus. Enough whining, self. She dropped the bag of groceries on the counter. Omelets were easy, but chili was doable. Avery reassured herself as she set a pound of ground sirloin and pork on a plate. *Shouldn't be bad, I got the leanest available.* Fresh tomatoes, chili powder, onions. She checked the recipe. Garlic, salt, and pepper. No kidney beans. She wrinkled her nose. Nasty stuff.

Soon, meat sizzled in a saucepan, and cornbread was ready to go in the oven. Avery wiped her hands on her apron. She felt downright prepared. What was missing? She checked the oven area. No flames. The table was set. When the meat cooked through, she added the other ingredients and topped the pot with a lid, letting it simmer. She was ready.

Is this how normal feels? Having friends over for dinner? She had a few board games they could choose to play. The house seemed clean. Whiskers sat in the front window, tail curling back and forth

as he stared at a squirrel in the front yard. Time remained before they would arrive, and Avery felt restless with excitement. Needing something to distract herself, she focused on the craft box. The wreath hung on the front door, but she had yet to do more to the drawing supplies than bring the box into the house. She moved it to the counter, where she could keep an eye on the simmering pot and slip the cornbread into the oven when they arrived.

She pulled the sketchbook from the box and opened to the first blank page. *What do I feel like?* A butterfly came to mind. She nabbed a charcoal pencil and in a few swipes had an insect looking for a place to land. She added a branch, then filled in a few leaves. She curled the vine across the top of the page. It needed flowers. Hmm. She slid the phone opened and googled 'flower vines.' *Passion vines? Those are amazing blooms.*

She glanced across the kitchen. Everything seemed fine. She used the image on her phone as a model for her picture. "I hope there's a lavender color in the box." She opened the colored pencils.

Dark fell as she colored. She stood and stretched. They should have been here by now. A look at the clock showed forty minutes late. She checked her phone, but no messages waited. Today was Thursday, right? It wouldn't be the first time she'd made a mistake. She double-checked. Thursday. Ok. *Do I call him? Do I wait longer?* What if he forgot or Helen was running late?

Just call. They were friends, right? She pushed his number.

"Avery." A curse flew from his mouth. A little one, but she was still surprised. "I meant to call you. Helen fell. I waited for an ambulance. We arrived at the hospital a while ago. This place is a madhouse, and I forgot."

"Oh no. Don't worry about it. How's Helen? What do you need? Are you hungry? I can bring something."

"You don't have to."

"Why do people say that? I can help. Let me help."

He sighed. "I didn't lock Helen's house. Can you try to find her phone? I want to get ahold of her daughter."

"Okay. I can put together some toiletries for her."

He rattled off the address. She copied it on a notepad sitting on the corner of the counter.

"Thank you." He sounded relieved.

"Don't thank me until I show up. See you in a few."

She fixed two servings of chili, topped them with cheese, and turned off the oven. No cornbread. She'd try to cook it later so it wouldn't go bad. She checked and turned everything off.



The phone map got her easily to Helen's. The elderly woman had a lovely-smelling home, like apples and cinnamon. She hated thinking of Helen helpless on the floor, crying out but no one around to hear. *Those thoughts do no good.* Avery searched and found the phone connected in the kitchen. She dug around in the bathroom and found a carry case already filled. The woman liked to be prepared. Good for her.

She didn't know her well enough to know what else to grab. An old woman purse hung on the back of a chair. Avery found her wallet inside. "She'll need this." She grabbed the bags and headed out the door. *Should I lock it? Were keys in the purse?* She didn't want to rummage further, so she left the door as she'd found it. It took ten minutes to get to the hospital from Helen's house. She chose to leave the bags in the car except for the chili. She could get the others when they were needed.

Stan the Man looked frazzled. His hair stuck out in odd places that he'd been running his hands through. He walked toward the front desk, paused, his shoulders slumped. It took a few paces before he looked up and noticed her, then he turned and walked in her direction.

That was possibly the moment she began to fall for him. Seriously fall. Stan's face brightened, with his entire countenance going from worried to delighted. His eyes shone, and his lips curled up in a smile.

"I made it." It was an inane thing to say, but her brain was malfunctioning at the moment. "And I come bearing gifts."

"You are a lifesaver."

"A girl always enjoys being appreciated for her chili."

Something prevented her from hugging him, but he didn't seem to notice. They took adjourning seats. She handed him the container with chili. "You may need a holder; it's still hot."

He used his jacket, accepted the spoon, and thanked God for her kindness and her food. They ate in companionable silence until Stan finished his bowl and dropped the dishes back in her bag. "Your chili was delicious."

"I wouldn't go that far." It wasn't bad, but his compliment warmed her heart. "What happened with Helen?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I heard her cry out when I arrived. She hadn't been there long, thank God. I nearly had a heart attack."

"I'm sorry. Do you think she broke something?" She itched to take his hand. She brushed her fingers through her hair and twirled a lock instead.

"It didn't seem like it, but I was afraid to move her."

"I've got her phone." She pulled the older model from her pocket.

Stan walked away to make the call in a quieter area. Avery looked around. A few others lingered in the waiting area, mostly bored, but some of their faces tightened with anxiety. The place was sterile, whitewashed, dull, and smelling faintly of bleach. She'd never been in a hospital before. There were beeps, and mysterious calls made overhead. Was Helen behind the double doors? Was she frightened or, in Helen-style, making friends of the nurses and assistants?

Stan returned, flopping into the chair. "They're coming. Which is good. The powers that be may not let us go back. We aren't family."

"Are they far?"

"Less than thirty minutes."

"I brought a bag for her. She already had it packed underneath her sink in the bathroom."

"We'll get it when they arrive." He squeezed her hand.

It felt ... right. Avery didn't want to dwell on the thought. "I've never been in a hospital."

"Not even as a kid? I think my brother and I had a reserved room in the ER."

She liked the way his brows rose. "Your poor parents. Only one brother?"

"Two of us to deal with, two years apart. What about you? Brothers or sisters?"

"Rexy's the closest I have to a sister."

"Your business partner?"

"We met in elementary school and ended up at the same university. Developed a business plan we decided to give a shot five years ago."

"What do you like about advertising?"

"Hmm." Avery leaned her head against the wall. "Helping small companies build a name for themselves, and helping them develop their brand."

"Brand?"

"Uh-huh." She turned her head to look at him. "You could definitely use branding."

He laughed. "I won't get a tattoo; no way am I sitting on the wrong side of a red-hot rod."

He thought ...? Avery started to giggle. She covered her mouth, trying to stop, but it wasn't helping much. "You aren't a cow. Branding is making something to be known for."

"What would I need to be known for?"

"Not you personally, your business. What do you want people to think of when they hear 'Stan the Man, Life-coach?'"

He shoved her shoulder, a gleam in his eye making her laugh harder. "If we were at my house, you'd be on the receiving end of my water gun, missy."

"What kind of heat are you packing?"

"Super Soaker 400. How do you like them apples?"

"Next time I go to your house, I'm remembering to bring my Socket Soaker."

"Come spring, we're going to have us some fun."

"Mr. Fischer?"

A middle-aged woman stepped closer, her hand tugging at the cross hanging around her neck. Stan jumped to his feet, hand moving forward. "Chelsea, I'm so sorry."

"You arrived at just the right time."

"God's timing, not mine. This is my friend, Avery Jacobs."

"Hello." Avery stood and shook hands with the woman. "I stopped by your mom's house to get some things for her. They're in my car."

"Hand me your keys, I'll get them for you." Stan stepped to the side. "Why don't you sit here."

"What have the doctors said?"

"They haven't been out. We've been waiting, though, in case you weren't here yet."

Avery handed the keys to Stan then faced Chelsea. "Are you on your own?"

She shook her head. "Daniel's parking the car. He dropped me at the front. Do you know Mom?"

"We met to carve pumpkins."

"That was you? She enjoyed the experience. It turned out good, too. She has it sitting in the front window of the house."

They talked about nothing in particular. Stan returned, followed by Daniel. Not much later, a doctor called the family for a brief conversation.

"I hope she's alright." Avery looked at Stan's hand holding hers.

He squeezed. "Even if something's broken, Miss Helen will be fine. She's got a lot of spit and fire left in her."

Chelsea and Daniel returned, Chelsea's smile a bit watery, but happy. "Nothing broken. They want to keep her overnight to make sure she's okay, but it looks like she'll be fine."

"Wonderful news." Stan gave Avery a shoulder hug.

He was relieved, she could tell. "I'm glad."

"If you need anything, give me a call." Stan pulled a card from his wallet. He turned it over to write a different number on the back before handing the card to Daniel. "Here's my cell number."

"Thank you."

They stepped away and Avery watched Stan shove the wallet into his back pocket. "You know, if you mean to write your cell number on every card, maybe you should use your cell number in the first place?"

"Expert advice, eh? How about I walk you to your car."

Overhead lights kept the parking lot bright in the dark. Stan reached for her car handle, then stood looking across the sea of cars. Avery felt a smile tugging at her lips. "You didn't drive, did you?"

"I came in the ambulance with Helen. She wanted someone familiar."

"So you are in need of a lift. Is that Super Soaker packed away?"

"Until summer, I promise." He chuckled.

She handed him her keys. "You drive to your place. That will be easier than giving me directions in the dark."

"Will you find your way from my place?"

"I'm like a homing pigeon. Home is easy."

"Get in, Miss Sass."

Avery walked around the back of the car. Being flirty felt fun. Should she be having fun? Why is it she never felt fat around Stan?

Chapter 29

What's wrong with eating just one? So often I end up throwing something away or constantly reminding myself to never do that again. I can't seem to eat just one. What is going on inside my head making me mindlessly go after more? I've got to finish it. Why? It's crazy, that's what it is. Maybe I have a chemical imbalance feeding into my obsessive behavior. That would be an excuse. Lack of will power isn't really an excuse, is it? I wish I had willpower. Savor one piece now and enjoy another piece on a different day. The way it should be.

If I see a plate of chopped peppers and carrots, I don't have this problem. Cookies, caramel rice cakes, ice cream—those all create ... issues. The peppers, not so much. Maybe it's an addiction. Goes back to chemicals in the brain, I think.

Whatever it is, I want it to stop. I want to enjoy a small portion today and have stuff around and enjoy more on a different day. The key is to stop.



Black spots blotted her vision as Avery pulled herself off the rowing machine. Her hand slipped from the padded bar, and she would have fallen into it if Stan hadn't caught her.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she rubbed her eyes. "I've got to sit for a moment." Dropped was more like it. She leaned her head against the back of the machine, the room appeared to be spinning.

"Get me some juice," Stan hollered as she closed her eyes. Her hands were shaking.

"Are you diabetic?"

Pull it together, Ave. Avery sat straighter and opened her eyes. Stan crouched in front of her, the skin between his eyebrows wrinkled. Was he concerned for her?

"Here, drink this."

He placed something cold in her hand. She sipped. The sweet flavor of orange juice rolled across her tongue. It didn't even matter it still had pulp.

A question had been asked. The wheels of her mind were starting to turn slow once more. Ah, yes. "Blood sugar drops when I don't eat. Never goes high."

"What happened to lunch?"

She took another swallow. "I was managing a commercial."

"Someone at the office couldn't get it for you?"

She shook her head.

"You can't work out on an empty stomach. Your body requires fuel."

"I have plenty of fuel."

"Not readily accessible."

"I thought about hitting the drive thru."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to see that look on your face."

"What look? This one?" He frowned. "You need to make time and plan things."

"I planned to order lunch at work today."

"How often does the plan to order out not happen?"

She pressed her lips together. He should be grateful the filter between her head and mouth was firmly in place.

"How often?"

"Stalin."

"Name calling doesn't help. You need to make a habit of planning if you want success."

"When am I supposed to be able to plan?" Of course, he was right, but no way would she say so. Why couldn't he understand the frustration she felt? At least she no longer felt like blacking out. She

took another swig of orange juice. "I work. I'm trying to fit the gym into a regular schedule. I have a modicum of life to live and a cat needing attention." Maybe not the cat.

"Do you know how to make a plan?"

Know how? Of course, didn't everyone? "Make a list, check twice, buy once."

He didn't push, but he was plotting something. She could read it in the gleam of his eyes.

He stood. "Feeling better?"

She didn't want him to be nice because calling him Stalin was sort of fun. Getting him relegated to the naughty list would be interesting as well. She lifted the bottle of juice. "Thanks for this."

"I'll add it to my tab. What say we get some food?"

"But the workout."

"Can't continue today because your body lacks proper fuel."

"I'll hit the drive-thru on my way home."

"Oh? And order what? What's healthy on the menu?"

Nothing? Admit that and McDonalds would lose stock. "Salad?"

He smiled. "And by the look on your face, not your favorite thing on the menu."

She shrugged. Who chose salad over a Quarter Pounder?

Stan pulled her to her feet and kept his hands against her arms to steady her. No black spots. "Much better."

"Let's go to Boston Market."

Why say no? Boston Market was a lot better than Mickey D's. She nodded.

Stan pushed his hands into his pockets. "I'll drive; we can get your car after."

Avery didn't argue. It wasn't long before she walked into the warm embrace of rotisserie chicken. She stood beside him, staring at the food case as they waited in line inside the restaurant. She wanted sweet potato casserole. Cinnamon apples. Stuffing. A sandwich on multigrain bread. Real grains made it okay, didn't it?

"I am craving carbs." Did she just say that out loud?

"Why?"

Yup, guess so. She closed her eyes. Her head was swimming, and her stomach felt a bit like a void. "Because I'm hungry?" *Pretty cranky, too.*

"There's fresh green beans. Tossed salad. Those things looking good to you?"

"Green beans are my favorite, actually. Not much in a mood for salad."

"You're low on energy. What'll give you the fastest boost?"

"Carbs. I'll feel much better after I've eaten a few."

"Carbs burn fast. You need something to counter balance your energy until the next meal."

She wrapped both hands around his upper arm and banged her head against it. "If I let you choose, will you save the lesson for later? I'm not very focused right now." Her bangs were getting long, and she huffed to move them out of the way of her eyes. He didn't seem to mind she was hanging on his arm. Still. Oops. She smiled. Hopefully, he wouldn't order a little piece of white chicken and carrots. Of course, she was starving and would eat it anyway.

"Grab a table." He nodded toward one of the empty ones near the window. "I'll bring the food."

Not chicken and carrots. Not chicken and carrots. Avery felt she should close her eyes and pray for something better. The tray he finally set between them looked better and smelled delicious. She nabbed a piece of cornbread, broke it in half and took a bite.

"Mind if I pray?"

"Not at all. I've been praying you pick something good for the past five minutes." She took another bite.

Stan shook his head, closed his eyes and spent a moment in silence.

Avery stared. *Thank you for this good man in my life. Life-coach in my life.* No need to get confused there, girl. How long would he stick around?

He set a plate in front of her. "You said you liked green beans."

"I do." She picked one up and popped it into her mouth. She resorted to fork and knife to cut up the chicken. "Sweet potatoes okay?"

"Do you like them?"

"Of course. I didn't think it was a good choice on a diet, though."

"Sweet potatoes have all sorts of vitamins and minerals, much better than regular potatoes."

"Are you a walking encyclopedia when it comes to nutrition?" The food was good, but honestly, it wouldn't have mattered either way.

"Some things are important to know."

"Well, I know you are a good man. Thank you for dinner. You can put it on my tab."

"I can handle dinner. How do you feel.?"

She closed her eyes and savored a bite of chicken. "Better. Much better."

"Tomorrow is Wednesday. What do you have planned?"

Planned? She wrinkled her forehead. "Work?"

"Meals, planned meals."

"Oh. Probably same as today." She closed her eyes. "Except lunch. I'll be sure to eat something for lunch."

"Like what?"

"You're a pest."

"It's what you pay me for. Let's plan for lunch."

"How about you bring Subway. Maybe I could give you a clue how to tighten your website."

"What's wrong with the website?"

"It needs some pizzazz, is all I'm saying."

"Which I'm sure you have plenty of." He smiled.

"Of course. We girls are made of fabulous things like pizzazz."

"Perky Avery Jacobs is preferred to Passing-Out Avery Jacobs."

"I would hope so. Awake should always be preferred over dead."

"Eat your dinner."

His grin made her insides feel lighter.

Chapter 30

She scared him. When her face went white, and she nearly fell to the floor, Avery Jacobs gave him a scare. He drove her back to the gym to get her car and then watched her drive away. Of course, he cared about his clients, but this was different. How could he continue as a life-coach if he risked falling for his clients? It wasn't professional, was it?

But he loved his job, loved the satisfaction of helping people achieve their goals. When Tate called the other night, he'd been mountain climbing, getting closer to his goal of a 25K. Watching Helen get more comfortable in her role as a widow, relying on herself instead of someone else. Helping Max regain the use of his arm after the accident.

Popeye's bark greeted him as he pulled into the driveway. The dog bounced as Stan opened the screen door on the back porch. He held it open and allowed Popeye to run into the yard. Trees lined the fence, creating a natural barrier from the neighbors. He made note of where the dog squatted to do his business. It was much safer to clean it up during the day. Then they went into the house.

He pulled his phone from his pocket. The screen flashed on, and he noticed a missed call. He pushed the button and held the phone to his ear. His heart thudded in his chest. A company he'd submitted an application to back in Seattle had a possible opening in the new year.

He turned the phone off but didn't erase the message. Was this answered prayer? He'd have to fly to Washington for an interview. Halloween was just around the corner, and he'd committed to helping at the harvest festival. Thanksgiving had his parents flying into town, so he'd have to get the house ready for visitors. Maybe he'd

set something up for early December. Maybe? Why the hesitation? It didn't take a lot of imagination to realize he liked life the way it was. Particularly now a certain someone was involved.

Avery was a client. He rubbed his chin. She started as a job, but that didn't mean she couldn't become something more. Popeye barked, reminding him of the need for food. He let the idea of Avery in his life simmer. It wasn't as scary as he thought it could be.

Chapter 31

There are days I wake up in the morning and feel brilliant. Superman powers kind of brilliant. These are the days when change seems plausible. Other days I drag myself from the bed. Every donut shop and fast food plaza on the way to work makes itself known. Why is it that happens? Is there something in my dreams that impact how my day will be? Is it related to my monthly cycle? The more I keep a journal, the more I'm wondering at the motivations. Why have I never noticed these things before? Have I always been like this? When did it start? What caused it to manifest? Do I want answers? Why do I get the feeling that if I look too closely, I may not like what I find?



Client breakdown before ten in the morning did not bode well for the day. Avery punched Stan's number, but his phone went to voice mail. "Hey, it's Avery. I'm tied up most of today, revamping a project. Let me know when you can reschedule."

Six hours later, she slouched back in her chair sipping a diet coke. She pulled open her desk drawer, found a hair clip, and pushed the bangs to the side. Never again. Her phone blinked. No more disasters today, please, her mind couldn't handle it. She pressed the button and heard Stan's voice. He wants to meet at the coffee shop instead? That was doable. Her insides gave a quiver. It would be nice to meet a friend and chat. Remy looked peaked, so she'd sent her home after lunch. She dialed his cell.

"Well, hello, Miss Jacobs."

"I finally surfaced. How late is your coffee shop open?"

"Starbucks is open until nine. Not as classy as Richards, but it'll do in a pinch."

She glanced at her watch. "How about four-thirty?"

"That works. Drive safe."

The comment should come across as over-protective, chauvinistic even, except it didn't ... not from Stan. She sighed. This was not going to end well.

Chapter 32

Focus on the job. How could he help her begin to realize her thoughts about her weight weren't the central issue? He'd known her for six weeks. She came across as intelligent, funny, interesting, even carrying the chip on her shoulder. Her weight didn't stop her from doing anything. She attacked every machine in the gym he used to challenge her.

How could he get her to reflect on other issues? He turned the corner. Be blunt. She didn't do well with subtle. Someone in her past made her think she was less than normal. A boyfriend? That topic could make for an interesting conversation. He tried to convince himself it would be professional, but somehow he knew otherwise.

She met him at the door. She'd pulled her bangs to the side, making her face look more open. He liked the look. He held the door open for her, and they walked to the counter.

"What are you folks having today?" The girl at the counter looked about sixteen.

"I'll have a grande spiced chai tea."

"Add a shot of acai, please" Avery piped in.

He shoved her slightly. "No shot of acai. Just the chai."

The girl glanced at them with a blank look. Avery shot him a look, widening her eyes as she tried not to laugh.

Stan swallowed his own laughter. "Are you having tea as well?"

"Yes, chai sounds good."

He paid for their order, and they found a table in the back. She took the bench. Stan sat across from her and tried to make his face look serious. "No easy questions today."

"Sounds ominous. You gonna quiz me on math?"

"No, I think we should explore relationships. Specifically, how boyfriends have impacted your life."

"Boyfriends?" She made a face. "You mean other than to prove I suck at relationships?" She turned her face away from him. "There's not much to tell. A couple of dates, and two serious relationships." She met his gaze. "Well, I thought they were serious. I'm not so sure what they thought."

He couldn't say much about being nearly thirty and having only two serious relationships. He was a few years older and could count his relationships on one hand.

"Was the first one in high school?"

"No. I didn't really go out in high school. I met Jon in college."

"What attracted you to him?"

She wiggled her mouth. "We were both business majors. We had several classes together. He was funny, a city man, and I was a country girl."

"How long did you date?"

"Over a year. He was hinting at the 'M' word."

"Did you want to marry him?"

She shook her head. "Not once I knew what he was up to. He was arrested for drug possession with intent to distribute."

What? How could she possibly have gone out with a man like that?

She raised her hand. "I kid you not. I had no idea his business interests tended toward illegal. I was devastated." She paused and seemed to consider something. "Okay, maybe embarrassed more than anything. The police even investigated my involvement, which, of course, there was none. I had no clue."

He leaned closer, grabbing his cup before knocking it over. "Did you see him after the arrest?"

"Once. He said a real woman would stand by her man. I did ask him if it was true. His eyes slid away, and I knew anything else he told me would be lies. I got up and walked out."

"Was there any contention in the relationship because of your size?"

"I didn't understand at the time. He was affectionate without insisting on," she looked down. "Well, you know. You're a guy. We held hands. We kissed." Her cheeks turned red.

Over a year and their relationship hadn't become physical? Christian values didn't seem to matter to her, and yet, she behaved like they did. "It wasn't an issue?"

She grimaced. "He had another girl for physical intimacy. A thin, curvy, sort of girl."

"Ah. You thought your size was a problem? Would you have been willing to have sex if you'd been the skinny one?"

"Well, no. I mean, I just always assumed I'd save," she stressed the word, "*that* for marriage. Mom said the best men put marriage first, and if I wanted to be worthy of his choices, I would do likewise."

"Your mom's a wise woman. I'm sorry if this is too personal for you. Self-image has a huge impact on relationships."

"It's okay." She breathed. "You said to expect hard questions."

"How long between Jon and relationship number two?"

"About nine years."

"Nine years?"

"You don't have to sound so shocked. The fiasco with Jon threw me for a loop. Then I figured men didn't find me attractive."

"I mean you no disrespect, but a successful businesswoman walking on legs like yours," he shook his head. "Either you intimidate or don't notice. I'm sure some have found you attractive."

Chapter 33

What is it that makes a person attractive? I want to say beauty, but I know I have seen couples together who one or both would not be called beautiful by any stretch of the imagination, and yet there is an attraction. Why am I attracted to men who are not good for me? Or is it a mechanism I use to justify not being in a relationship? Do I need to think I'm attractive before someone else will find me attractive? Is it possible, someone would be attracted to me even if I'm not a size twelve?



Avery didn't know what to say. The warmth of his response put butterflies in her stomach. He didn't say he was attracted, but she was finding it more and more difficult to stay uninterested.

"I'm sorry, I'm not being a good life-coach today."

"I ... no, I think you shot my self-esteem up by ten points." Did he really like her legs? She was tempted to cross them but kept them firmly planted on the floor.

He took a drink of his chai tea. "Want to talk about the second relationship?"

"Paul. He was different. We met at a party for a client. He's very good at smarming people."

"Smarming?" Stan smiled. "I'm not familiar."

"He's charming and smart about getting what he wants."

"And he wanted you."

"I thought so, but once again, hindsight. He wanted a ready date. We weren't about growing together as a couple. Two years, and I still didn't realize the truth."

"Forest for the trees."

She agreed. "I knew I wanted more. I wanted deeper, and then one day he says he didn't love me."

"Any warnings? Did he offer to talk about it?"

"No. We were going out for dinner. I think he found someone else better and no longer needed to bother with me."

"He was a creep."

"I pick them well, don't I?"

"Once you understand your value, whether you lose weight or stay exactly as you are, it won't be a problem. May I be honest?"

"No, please lie and shatter my dreams." She slapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry."

Stan laughed, a deep, truly amused laugh making her smile as well. "You're right. It's a stupid thing to ask. May I tell you what you may or may not want to hear? You will likely disagree."

She leaned forward, placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands, eyes wide and staring at him. "Yes, please. I am all ears."

"Fine. You don't have a weight problem. Your problem is self-image. Yes, you are above what health experts consider the appropriate size and losing weight will be good for your health. And yes, there are men who will be turned off because you aren't a size four. You wouldn't like those men anyway. The way you think of yourself affects how you dress, whether or not you make eye contact or who you notice. We've had multiple conversations. I find you to be witty and quirky."

"But you don't find me attractive." Oh, boy, she didn't say those words. She wanted to drop her head on the table.

"If I did, would you give me enough attention to ask you out?"

So he didn't find her attractive? Was she insane to think he would? "Um, since we aren't dating, or considering dating, I don't know what I would have done." Hers was a diplomatic answer, wasn't it? Avery chugged on her cooling chai. Now would be a good time to be swallowed up by a hole in the ground.

"Next boyfriend. What do you want him to notice most about you?"

"I'm fun to be with. He'll enjoy spending time together."

"Sounds fair. What don't you want him to notice?"

"I'm fat. I want to be different."

"Do you think you're beautiful?"

"Of course not."

"Because of your size?"

"Not just that. I don't have big blue eyes or long blond hair. My nose is stubby. My lips are wide."

"Okay, stop." He held his hand up. "I can't convince you you're beautiful. You want to dissect all these little parts and find imperfections in each of them. You need to take some serious time looking at a mirror and work on the whole image. You are beautifully and wonderfully made, that's God's promise."

She moved one hand to twirl her hair. "May I keep you? Follow me around and tell me these things when I need to hear them?" Good grief, what was wrong with her? She was crushing on her life-coach.

"It's my pleasure to bonk you and say you are beautifully and wonderfully created by God, however many times a day is necessary."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're like Gibbs, aren't you? You plan to slap the back of my head."

"Whatever works." His eyes glittered as he drank more tea.

Chapter 34

What makes a good day? Is it the people you spend it with? The victories you achieve? Enjoying a moment of rest in your favorite chair, curled up with a cat and a good book? There's something renewing about days like these. Even in the roughest circumstances, we need time to sit back and breathe. I need time to breathe. Why have I thought constant motion is a sign of success?



Saturday, Avery sat in her window seat, hand curled around a mug of hot tea. Rain poured outside, drops chasing each other across the window panes. She trailed a finger after one. The phone jingled, breaking her moment of peace. A momentary thought to let it go to voice mail tempted, but it could be a client, or Rexy needing something. She stretched for the handset. "Hey."

"Whatcha up to?"

"Sitting in the window watching the rain." She settled back. Stan's voice melted pleasantly into the day.

"Dismal day."

"I don't know. There's something beautiful about a rainy day. Like it's okay to not be bright and brilliant all the time. Even nature needs her down time."

He laughed. "You've been sitting too long."

"I'm not munching mindlessly on anything."

"I wasn't calling to pester you about snacks."

"Then what do you want?"

"Talk. Maybe do something, if you aren't busy. You sound like you aren't busy."

"Do something with me? Your other clients not available?"

"I'm your life-coach, which means I'm supposed to be in your life."

"True." The thought warmed her heart.

"We've worked well together for over a month."

"Ah, next level."

"You could say." The teasing note in his voice suggested something else. "What's something you enjoy doing?"

Doing? Spur of the moment. "Antique district? Haven't been in ages."

"Could be fun. I'll pick you up in an hour."

Of course, it was raining, but staying dry was overrated. "If you're sure."

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't."

It's always fun having your own words thrown back at you. Avery laughed, jumped from the window seat, disturbing Whiskers, whose yowl declared travesty. She skipped to the bedroom, ignoring the warning bells in her head. They were friends. He was helping her develop better habits. This had nothing to do with spending time together. He'd do the same thing for any of his clients.

She pulled a light sweater from her closet, donned a fresh pair of jeans, and slipped her feet into ankle socks and sneakers. The drive to historic downtown was uneventful, rain slowing to a drizzle and promising to keep at it for the next few hours. Avery didn't mind. She slipped her purse over her shoulder and exited the car. Stan waited near the corner, under the overhang. His navy windbreaker looked comfortable. She needed one of those. His curls looked damp, but he didn't seem to mind. Someone else in the world didn't care if they got a bit wet? Too good to be true! She waved, checked the street, and jogged over.

"It's a good day to make deals." She laughed, shaking water from her head.

A variety of shops lined two blocks of historic downtown. There was enough overhang to keep them from most of the rain. Stan placed his hand on the door. "Not much competition. Shall we start here?"

She nodded, and then thanked him when he held the door open. They sauntered in.



"That's the fourth dresser you've looked through. Do you need one?" Avery watched Stan pull a drawer.

"This is craftsmanship." He took the drawer and turned it on its side. "See how the two pieces fit together?"

"Like cogs. Is there a company name stamped on the bottom?"

"Nope, but someone knew what they were doing."

"Look at this piece. It's grand." She rubbed her hand on the cherry finish of an oversized wardrobe. "Reminds me of the Narnia books."

"Do you think we'll find a magical kingdom hidden inside?"

"More likely spiders."

"You lack imagination."

"Hey, Halloween's tomorrow. It's a perfect spot to drape one of those fat fuzzy creatures with googly eyes."

Stan made a face. "I prefer to decorate with scarecrow and pumpkins."

"Is your pumpkin surviving on the front stoop?"

"Let's just say having Halloween over tomorrow is a good thing."

"Uh-huh."

They continued through the shops.

"Snack time, my treat." Avery paused at the little tea shop.

"You don't have to."

"Never refuse a lady, kind sir." She opened the door. "Hot tea and a muffin aren't much."

"If you say so."

There were other delicacies which should have tempted, but Avery wasn't. A modest apple cinnamon muffin and hot black tea seemed perfect. Stan chose fresh blueberry.

"Have you always lived in Dawson?" She asked as she cut her muffin in pieces.

"Moved here after college. My family lives in Washington."

"DC?"

"No, the state."

"Georgia's a long way from home. You followed a girl, didn't you?"

"I did. It didn't last, but I liked it here enough to stay."

"I'm glad you did. Have there been a slew of girlfriends since?"

He laughed. "My turn? I've dated, just haven't found someone serious yet. Until then, I'll enjoy getting to know people."

"Not buying it. Everyone's had a bad experience or two."

"My worst? We weren't even dating. She was a client, but she thought things were more serious than they were."

Her heart stopped. Did he mean her? He can't have meant her. Why would he call and invite her to do things if he was concerned she was interested in him? "What happened?"

He folded his arms on the table. "Her name was Jennifer. She'd been mugged. I admit, it had to be terrifying. She seemed like a sweet girl, and I wanted to help her with self-defense and being aware of her surroundings. She became more demanding of my time like she thought something bad would happen to her if I wasn't around."

"Did she stalk you?"

He shook his head. "I referred her to a psychiatrist. It was the hardest thing I've gone through. I developed the questionnaire after that experience. It gives me an idea of my client's needs, and if there are any red flags, I don't take them on."

"You didn't get any red flags from me?" Difficult to believe.

He smiled. "No red flags from you. I will admit that walking into your apartment and listening to you screaming at a box of Little Debbie's caused a moment of concern."

"You should have run."

"No. This is a journey I'm glad to take."

She wasn't sure how to respond, but it made her feel good. They finished their snack and headed outside.

The afternoon didn't remain dreary. Clouds pulled apart as a cool breeze rolled in from the north.

"I think fall has truly arrived." Stan pulled his jacket collar closer to his ears.

Avery stretched her arms and spun around once. "Blue sky, crisp air, colorful leaves—I love it! We should see it all this week."

"How about coming to the fall festival tomorrow?"

"You mean actually get somewhere instead of walking like a hamster on a treadmill?"

"I hate to tear you away from the gym."

"Oh, please, tear." She laughed. "Is it at your church?"

"One of the deacons has property to the west, behind the YMCA. How about I pick you up? What time can you be ready?"

"It's Sunday. How early do you want to head out?"

"Let's say three o'clock. We can help set up."

A touch of joy from the day lingered through the evening, long after Stan had returned to his normal life. She gave herself a hard look in the mirror. "Do not start thinking things. He's helping you, and you are paying him." It would do well to remind herself frequently.

Chapter 35

The church message mulled in his thoughts as Stan drove across town to get Avery. Pastor didn't expound on the evils of Halloween; he spoke of the resurrection and life eternal that could be had by all. What would Avery think of eternity? As her life-coach, he wasn't responsible for her spiritual well-being, and yet, wasn't the core of all problems spiritual? He'd have to ask her someday. Not yet.

He pulled up to her house. The rental property was well-tended. Would she purchase someday? As a business woman, she had to know the benefits of owning property. He parked in the driveway and walked to the front door. It was a single-story mid-century house. The wreath on the door marked her decorating for the season. He looked at the porch. The carved pumpkin sat on a table. A few insects buzzed around it, but it still seemed in good shape. Next year they'd have to wait until it was closer to Halloween. Did he intend to still be working with her in a year? He rang the bell. Working? Probably not. Still have her in his life? Likely.

She opened the door. Her hair was different. She'd used an orange band to pull it back from her face, then let some of her bangs hang over her forehead. Black cat earrings with glittering eyes dangled from her ears. "Nice touch. Did Whiskers pick them out?"

She touched one of them. "He tried to steal it off my bureau."

"Ah, competition. Ready?"

"Do I need to bring anything? Food or drinks?"

"The church provides stuff. I have a box of popcorn balls."

Her eyes widened. "I don't even have a bag of candy."

"You're my guest, don't worry. You'll see, the kids won't miss out on a thing."

"You're sure?"

“Positive.”

“Better than negative.” She closed the door and dropped her keys in her purse.

Why did she have to be so cute? He walked behind her to keep from putting his arm around her. In the car, he had the radio on, and she didn't seem to mind listening. Which was good, because he had a dilemma. How was he supposed to be a life-coach when he was more interested in getting to know her on a personal level?

Chapter 36

Public spaces. If I'm meeting people in relation to work, there is only a shallow level of interaction, no need to expect more or want more. In regards to a social event, expectations are higher, and I lack a certain extrovert characteristic to truly relax and enjoy myself. If REXY and I are together, I can interact with her which makes the event easier to bear. What would it be like to have a significant other who would always be there?



It didn't help when Stan the Man looked good in plaid, or his jeans curved quite nicely around his back side. Avery hung her hands in her back pockets and leaned against the barn, waiting for the guys to finish discussing the ins and outs of grilling. Put it on, take it off. What else did they need?

"Hi there, I'm Barb Waller. Did I see you come in with Stanley?"

Avery turned at the strongest southern drawl she'd ever heard. The slightly older woman had a bright smile that greeted the world. Her long dark hair didn't move, not even when a breeze curled around the corner. Barb rubbed her arms. "Almost time for the heavier jackets. What's your name, hon?"

Avery held out her hand. "Avery Jacobs. And we're friends. Not together, or anything."

"Then you should watch where your eyes linger."

Avery's cheeks burned, but Barb continued without noticing her embarrassment. "The nicely put together hunk beside Stan is my husband, Bobby."

"This is your property?"

"Bobby wanted a farm. It's close enough to the city I don't mind. Are you a city girl?"

"Have been long enough. I own an advertising agency downtown."

"Advertising? Sounds exciting."

"I love it. I get to meet lots of locals. What do you do?"

She moved her eyebrows. "I dabble. Church secretary. Taxes for many of our elderly patrons. Bobby's CEO."

"You stay busy."

"Keeps me out of trouble." She linked arms with Avery. "Come inside. We'll have children running around in no time, now's the time to see it."

They walked into the barn. One corner, beneath an upstairs section of the barn, was covered in a thick layer of hay. "There's an air mattress as well. The kids'll be jumping onto the pile."

A roped area had large wood crates. "Bobbing for apples. My favorite until I had to get a crown on one of my front teeth."

Other game areas were set up throughout the barn. Where the double doors stood open, a wagon hitched to a John Deere stood ready with bales of hay and a few blankets.

"What's that for?" Avery pointed at the wagon.

"A hayride. Have you been on one of those before? I'm afraid there's too much excitement tonight for the horses."

Barb finished her tour when Stan stepped through the door. "There's your young man. Be sure he takes you on the hayride."



Avery grinned at Stan. "She is a trip."

"They both are. Wait till you see them together."

Avery had never spent Halloween with so many people. Children screamed, running across the yard chasing two big dogs and loving every moment. The smell of fire wafted through the air. With dinner

over, the fun winding down, and the John Deere ready to roll, Stan offered her a hand into the wagon. A giggling preteen fell against her legs. Avery nudged a smidge closer to Stan as he tossed a blanket across their laps. Several others bundled up around them, giving a screech as the wagon pulled away from the barn. Night had fallen, but the stars gleamed overhead. Air nipped, making the blankets welcome commodities. One of the younger girls tugged on her sleeve. Avery leaned over.

The girl put her hand to Avery's ear. "You should have him take you on the haunted hayride. Then you can jump in his arms."

"Thanks. I'll have to remember your advice."

Stan grinned when she straightened. "Making friends?"

"Getting advice from the young ones."

"Anything good?"

She offered a small smile. "Girl stuff."

He bumped her shoulder. "You like kids?"

Avery grinned at the girl beside her. The round face with bright blue eyes looked joyful as she grabbed Avery's arm when the wagon bounced. She looked back at Stan, nudging her head toward the girl. "I like this one."

The ride came to an end. Children and teens jumped from the sides and front of the wagon. Stan stood, but Avery scooted to the back, pushing herself off. She brushed hay from her back side. "Hayrides are fun."

"You should try a horse-drawn carriage on a snowy evening."

"Does he do rides for Christmas?"

"I'm sure it can be arranged. Lots more blankets, though. Probably colder."

Children began to droop, and the adults knew it was time to wrap up the evening. They gathered around the larger fire pit. Parents held little ones with closing eyes. Teens used sticks to sword fight until a larger man knocked their heads. A lone voice started to sing, and others joined in. *This little light of mine. I'm going to let it shine.* Avery had never heard the song, but after two rounds she couldn't stop humming.

"What an amazing night." Avery turned in her seat as Stan drove toward her house. "You do this every year instead of sitting at home for Halloween?"

"Yep."

"Which one was the preacher? I don't remember meeting him. It's a him, isn't it?"

"Pastor Lingham? Yes, it's a him. He wasn't there tonight. Martha Preene is having surgery on Monday and asked if he'd sit with her tonight."

"That's sweet."

"He's a good pastor. Would you like to visit our church next week and meet him?"

"I already have plans for the morning."

"Next time, then."

He didn't push, but Avery wondered if she'd have given in if he pushed a little. "Maybe when I get home I'll give you a call to get pointers for making a grocery list."

"I have a better idea. How about I come over and help?"

"Make sure I get it done, huh?"

"Something like that."

"Fine, I'll be home by two."

"Two it is." He pulled into her drive.

Avery stopped him from getting out. "Thanks for tonight. It was special."

"Until tomorrow."

Words said as though he looked forward to time together. He waited until she opened the front door before driving away.



A touch of joy from the day continued through the evening, long after Stan had driven off into the distance. She gave herself a hard look in the mirror. "Do not start thinking things. He's helping

you, and you are paying him.” She would do well to remind herself frequently.

She studied her image in the mirror. Was she losing weight? She’d been trying. She should make a trip to Walmart in the morning before Stan came over. He was spending a lot of time on her, it would be nice if she could show definite results.

Chapter 37

Scales are the mockery of perceived progress. Should I have one of my own? I certainly won't use the one in the foyer of Publix. Can you imagine watching the arrow scroll around and around while people behind you could watch? Uh, no, not an option. On TV, they have scales reading 'beautiful' or 'chasing goals.' Do they make them for real? Of course not. What kind to get? Digital could be good, don't have to watch the arrow spin. Big number display and I don't have to squint to read the results. Not that I want to read the results.



Avery closed her eyes, stretched out her arm, and touched one. She opened her eyes. A white scale with big numbers to stare at her when she looked down. It was what she always wanted. *Yeah, right.* She grumbled to herself as she grabbed the scale and placed it in the cart. Towels quickly piled on top. She continued her way through Walmart. What was she thinking? Was this the right thing to do? The gym had a scale she could use. With other people looking on. At least, if she had one in the house, she could know and not worry about other people staring.

The first place she put it was in the bathroom. Avery stepped from the room and then shivered. Having to see it every day? Multiple times a day? That wasn't healthy, was it? The closet. Another minute and it was hiding beneath a row of dresses. But the closet was carpeted. The scale wouldn't work on carpet, would it? The spare bedroom had wood floors. Hide it in there, and she'd use it once

a week. That should work okay, shouldn't it? She closed the door. Maybe tomorrow she'd find the courage to actually give it a try.

The doorbell rang, causing Avery to jump. She'd been standing in the hallway staring at the spare bedroom door. Not creepy at all. Whiskers flew by her feet. Uh oh, he knew who was at the front. Stan stood on the porch with a bag.

"I thought we were making a list?" Avery waved him in.

He pulled a thin pad of paper decorated with cat paws from the bag. "I brought list-making tools." He placed it on the counter and reached for something else. A thick something else looking well used.

"Recipe book?"

"Not any recipe book. This belonged to my grandmother. It's McCalls. They were huge back in the day."

"I bought a scale at the store today."

"A scale? You don't have to measure your food."

"Not for food. For me."

"Oh. What's wrong with the one at the gym?"

"It's out in the open? The same way it is at Publix. Although, why they have a scale at a grocery store is beyond me. Isn't it counter-productive?"

"You think a scale will be helpful?"

"Shouldn't I be using one? How else will I tell how much I've lost?"

"Your clothes tell you more than the scale."

Great. You mean the same clothes I've been wearing for the past five years? "But my clothes aren't any different."

"Are you serious?" He waved his arm toward the hall leading to the bedrooms. "Go put on the skirt and blouse you wore to our first meeting."

The man had issues. Avery pulled the long black skirt and white blouse. The skirt settled around her hips rather than her waist. What happened? She checked the zipper, it was properly closed. She put the blouse on. It seemed much the same. At least it was long enough to mask her navel-hugging skirt. She headed back to the living room.

"For the record, shorter skirts look better on you." He made a swirly motion with his finger.

He wanted her to spin around? She rolled her eyes but complied.

"How does it feel?"

Avery shrugged. "The skirt is loose, I'll grant you."

"Blouse is too."

"Not really."

He took her hand and moved her to the mirror by the front door.

"What?" Avery turned a little both ways. What was he trying to prove? The blouse looked blousy.

"Hold your arms out. When you can do this, the shirt is too big." He bunched fabric into his hands on both sides of her waist. The blouse became fitted. "See? You're making changes in your life, and it shows."

"A little, I guess." It was a little, but maybe more than she thought?

"You need to go shopping. Find clothes in a smaller size and try them on."

"Too soon, isn't it? What if this doesn't work?"

"You want to lose weight, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"You're willing to do what it takes, right?"

"I'm trying."

"You're succeeding. You need to have more confidence in yourself. Take Rexy with you and have fun."

Could she? Dare she?

"And get something other than black. Black's for old ladies and widows."

"Yes, Stalin." She was going to go shopping. She could do this. It would work.

He returned to the living room. "Put your pants back on before your skirt falls off." He hollered at her.

"Yes, Stalin." She repeated louder, but there was a bit of a skip in her step as she returned to the bedroom.

Chapter 38

Clothes aren't just body covering. The right outfit can make you feel like a thousand bucks, even if you didn't spend as much on it. Wrong clothes make you feel frumpy. There are many days I wake up and feel that frumpy is the way to go. Loose top, loose bottom, cover as much as possible. Lacks style. Lacks flare. Maybe if I determined to dress like a thousand bucks more often, I'll feel like I deserve to get somewhere in my goals. It's a thought.



Shopping was a good idea. Avery tapped her pencil on the desk. She didn't need much, most of her clothes still fit. She thought about the skirt. She didn't have to unzip it, just gave it a tug and it fell to the floor. What if something tugged on it by accident at work? Mortifying wasn't a strong enough word. She crossed the hall and knocked on Remy's door, sticking her head in before Remy responded. "Think Buzz would let you go shopping some night this week?"

"Let? Like I need to ask him for permission? And shopping? What are we shopping for?"

"Stan thinks I need to get a few smaller clothes. It's been about six weeks, maybe I'm down a size?"

"I can tell by your face you're down more than a size. Your cheek bones are showing."

Avery covered her cheeks. "What do you mean they're showing? What's wrong with my cheek bones?"

Rexy laughed as she crossed the office, pulling Avery's hands away from her face. "Nothing is wrong. When do I get to meet Stan? I think he's got you afluttering."

"Afluttering isn't even a word, and he doesn't have me anything. I'm paying him to help me improve myself."

"You keep telling yourself, sister. How about we close shop early and head to some real stores? How much do we have to spend?"

Avery rolled her eyes. "No purses."

"The right purse can make you look slimmer." Rexy demonstrated by hanging her Gucci over her shoulder.

"I don't have an additional closet in my house to store purses the way you do. I'll just borrow one of yours and see how it fits." Avery glanced at the calendar on Rexy's desk. "Doesn't look like we have any client meetings this afternoon. I'll tell Elaine we're leaving."

"I'm shocked." Rexy grabbed her chest and took a step backward. "You want to shop. Stan has powers more mysterious than mine."

"Drama queen. You're driving."



"I don't want anything too expensive. The point is to continue losing weight, which means whatever I buy today won't fit in a few months. Hopefully."

"I think we can keep it reasonable, you're right. But you can also buy something knockout to fit in a few months. Think of it as motivation."

They meandered to the woman's section of a department store at the mall. Avery stopped at a rack of dark skirts. "How about I try the 1x, 2x, and 3x, see which fits best?"

"Black? Really? Why not try the striped? Vertical lines are good."

"Black is a classic. What do people have against classic?"

"I'm not against black." Rexy gave her a questioning look. "Who else has said something about your propensity for black?"

"Stan noticed I wear a lot of black."

"Life-coach Stan who isn't interested in you beyond your wallet? That Stan?"

Avery hated the feel of heat in her cheeks. There was no point in blushing. "He offered an opinion." Heaven forbid she say anything about short skirts. Oy vey.

The 1x turned out to be tight, but not undoable, where the 2x was doable but slightly loose. Did they make a one-and-a-half?

Rexy pointed to the skirt Avery held in her right hand. "Go with the 1x. Keep working the way you are, and it will loosen up in no time."

A knee-length dress caught her eye as they headed toward blouses. It was a rust and brown print, with little cap sleeves. The skirt flared from a fitted waist.

Slowing to look must have made Rexy's radar ping. She nabbed one off the hook. "This is adorable." She held it up to Avery, bonking her nose with the top of the hanger.

"I don't think I'll be a size sixteen anytime soon."

"Something to look forward to."

"Or be a steady reminder of failure."

"You have to choose. Will you be positive or negative?"

"I want to be positive, but I'm a realist."

Rexy shook her head. "Nope. Realists do not have to be negative. If you are truly a realist, you know you can continue working toward your goal and succeed."

"It is cute." Avery chewed on her top lip. "But it may look hideous on."

"I think it will be fabulous." She draped it over the cart holding the striped skirt. "We are going to get it."

"We" meaning me. Avery shrugged. It wouldn't be the first time she'd bought something she never wore.



By the end of the evening, the bags pulled on her arms. She shouldn't have done so much, but shopping was fun. Avery shoved the smaller ones into the larger Sears bag and carted her haul to the front door of her house. Once inside, she made a beeline for the bedroom, dumping the bags onto her unmade bed. She looked at her closet as she stepped out of her shoes. Things were going to have to go to make room for the new items, but should she get rid of them? Store them in bins somewhere? Did she have bins? She could make a pile and take care of it later. Tomorrow. Best not to procrastinate.

The last item she pulled from a bag was the way-too-small dress. Why had she let Remy talk her into it? "Hang it in the back and forget about it." Next time she shopped, she'd find it and hopefully be closer to reaching the goal. Would there be a next time shopping trip? Was she asking, or telling, herself? Telling herself. She moved the mirror. "You," she wagged her finger at the reflection, "are following a plan. Continue to follow the plan, and you will get to do more shopping. You are sticking with it." So there.

Chapter 39

Why do people send food for the holidays? How does a box of chocolates show appreciation? If it isn't candy, it's cookies or hot chocolate with the dried marshmallows. I've purchased boxes of Lucky Charms just to pick out the marshmallows. Those things are delicious ... and unnecessary. It would almost be better to have a drinking problem because people don't send alcohol to drunks. Why do they send goodies to fat people? Of course, one must be gracious and thank them. Then what? If I throw something away, I feel guilty. If I pass it on to someone else, how do I know they aren't struggling the way I am? If I grumble, I'm ungrateful. The entire holiday season is a mound of guilt and trying to deny the gut-wrenching desire to absorb the sweetness. Okay, that was harsh, but I am at the end of my patience.



Sticking with the plan worked until the early holiday gifts started arriving. Because what did people send for holiday treats? Cookies. Fudge. Those round candies covered with nuts. The first jar of Christmas Kisses arrived on Elaine's desk, and it was the most natural thing in the world for Avery to reach in, take one, and pop it into her mouth. And then more followed. After about the fourth trip past the reception desk and the fourth Hershey Kiss popped into her mouth, Avery realized what she was doing. She pulled gum from her drawer and tried chewing on minty freshness instead. It wasn't as good as the chocolate. Why now? She'd been doing so well. She looked down at her navy skirt. She resolved to remain at her desk until it was time to leave.

Elaine brought her a sandwich and iced tea for lunch. She handed her a pink note. *Stan Fischer called.* She looked up. "When did Stan call?"

"Right before I went for lunch."

Avery checked her phone. No messages. The number on the pink slip was different. She forked a piece of melon from the fruit cup with the sandwich and dialed the number.

"Remember when I said I feared heights? Apparently, my phone felt the same way."

"What happened?"

He laughed. "Tate talked me into climbing the rock wall. Phone did not survive the fall."

"At least you made it some distance up the wall."

"I did. Almost to the top. And no, I did not fall. Even if I did, Tate uses a harness system. I just didn't think the phone needed one as well."

"I'm glad you survived. Maybe I'll give it a try some day."

His chuckle made her insides warm. "I won't push, but if you ever decide to climb the wall, I'll stand on the floor cheering you as high as you want to go."

"How do you feel about scuba diving?"

"I've been snorkeling, that's the extent of my experience. Do you have plans for dinner? You can report on your list-making success."

"No plans for dinner. There's a Lean Cuisine in the freezer I was pretty sure I wasn't actually going to try to eat."

"Dinner with me is a much better choice."

Oh, yes, it is. She closed her eyes. "Where do you want to go?"

"How about Norby's? They have a petite sirloin special tonight."

"Twist my arm, why don't you?"



"I hate the holidays." The words came out with more animosity than anticipated. Avery lowered her head, using her hair to block

out the other patrons, who were probably staring. Dinner had been served, and the six-ounce sirloin smelled like meat roasted over a fire ought to smell. Sautéed mushrooms in wine sauce smothering it with green beans on the side. Stan had the same sort of steak, but he chose broccoli as his side dish.

“Any holiday or this time of year?”

“This.” She looked at him, not wanting it to be true, but it was. “Thanksgiving to New Years. It’s all about food. Parties. Dinners. Cookies grandma baked fifty years ago.”

“Many like those traditions.”

“But why? How come some people can get through the holidays without adding a pound while others of us struggle?”

“It’s hard not to see all the treats this time of year.” He agreed.

Avery cut into her steak, venting frustration through her knife. “How do you look at a plate of chocolate chips and not want one? Or deprive yourself and end up eating a dozen next time? It’s a buffet of failure going on and on.” It felt that way. Failure time and again. She pushed the plate to the side and plopped her head onto her arms.

He touched her head. His hands smoothed her hair and pulled through. He felt good.

“You are a special woman, Avery Jacobs.”

“Nuthouse special.”

Oh, she liked his laugh. “Good special. The kind making me want to get to know you more.”

She peeked at him. He wasn’t joking or being sarcastic. “Has anyone told you you’re a decent life-coach?”

“Eat your steak. It’s a good dinner. Tomorrow we will have lunch together and plan more meals for the week.”

She sat straight and pulled her plate forward again. “No pearls of wisdom regarding my outburst?”

“You may not be ready for what I have to say.”

“How does one get ready? Spill the beans, it’s okay.”

"The problem isn't the food. Yes, you're right, there is way more than necessary, but if you're focusing on the problem of food, you've missed the people to share it with."

"What do you mean? I know people are around."

"You're quiet and reserved, right?"

Usually. Except with him—drat the man.

"Do you ever feel alone, even surrounded by people?"

Avery shrugged, "I never thought much about it."

"Do you feel lonely now?"

"No. I'm talking to you."

"We aren't just talking, Ave. We're interacting."

She disagreed with a shake of her head. "Too one-sided. Tell me something about you."

"Like what?" He popped a mushroom in his mouth.

"What's your favorite Christmas memory?"

"Easy. When I was little, Dad would fly me over the tree so I could land the star on top."

"Worst Christmas ever?"

"My parents considered getting a divorce and sent us to Aunt Kathy's. She tried to do Christmas for us, but we knew what was happening. We made her cry; all she did was try to help."

Avery reached over and gripped his hands. "That must have been awful."

"I went back a few years ago and begged her forgiveness."

"Did she accept?"

"Yes. Said it wasn't necessary, but I could tell she was touched."

"You made a sweet gesture. Who wouldn't be touched?"

"What about you? Ever need to apologize or ask forgiveness?"

"Nope. Oh, wait. There was this one time. I had a boyfriend and was ... what's a good word? Jittery. I backed into a car."

"Nice."

"Rexy says I get distracted too easily when new people show up in my life."

"You've been friends a long time?"

"Since grade school. She met Buzz in college. He's a sweetie."

"Unlike your college sweetheart."

"Mr. Darcy would have been the better choice." Avery ate a bite of steak. "Ah, Jane Austin knew how to write a man."

"Fictional characters can be tricky, falling in love with words on a page. Flesh and blood people aren't as interesting."

Avery swirled more lemon into her water. "Something about 'happily ever after.' It might never happen, but the thought of it brings hope."

"I can think of better things to have hope in."

"Like what?"

"Your business does well."

"I can be very creative when I want."

"How about we put some creativity into building a gingerbread house? The Lighthouse Committee is sponsoring a competition. It's their annual fundraiser."

"I don't cook."

"Something we can work on after Christmas. For now, we can get a kit and put it together."

"Uh-huh, craftsmanship. You'll have to cut cogs and fit the walls together."

"You are a brat. Do you have a table we can use or would you want to go to my place?"

"If I can find a way to keep Whiskers from walking through the icing, we can use my house."

"You're worried about a bit of icing after the mutilation you committed last month?"

She slapped his arm. Brat was too mild a word to describe him.

Chapter 40

Month number two. Stan placed the check from Avery in his pocket, given more graciously this month than the last. They stood between two pillars at the entrance to a park. Her cheeks were bright, but she wasn't about to run away, at least not without him. "How do you feel you're doing?" They began walking the cement path.

"Like I'm making more forward progress than not."

"Good. What's holding you back?"

"Scale." She grimaced. "Numbers don't change quickly."

"God didn't design our bodies to change quickly."

She huffed. "Mine certainly put on the weight quickly."

"Overnight or over time?"

She glared at him but remained quiet. He forced his face not to smile as he stopped at the first bench along the trail. "Scales can be dangerous. Your weight's affected by your monthly cycle, the clothes you're wearing, muscle mass. How often do you get on the scale?"

"I intended it to be weekly." She gave him a quizzical glance. "Tired already?"

He shook his head as he pulled his right leg onto the seat of the bench and leaned over, stretching his thigh muscles. "Stretching. You intended to use the scale weekly, but?"

She frowned, pulling her leg onto the bench, mimicking his movements. "But I keep hoping numbers will move faster."

He switched legs, studying his sneaker lacing as she followed suit. "Get rid of the scale, Avery."

"But how will I know?" She stood and bounced on the balls of her feet.

He motioned for her to return to the trail. "Do you feel better looking at the scale or the new clothes you had to buy?" He had her. Almost. He turned as she trailed behind him a few feet. "Keep up."

"Your legs are longer." Her response sounded like a grumble, but her eyes were playful.

"Push a little. You can go faster."

She rolled her eyes but lessened the gap between them. "What if I go back to using the scale once a week?"

He faced forward, thankful nothing had come up behind him unawares. "You can do that at the gym or supermarket. I'll even stand behind you and make sure no one can see." The image of him braced behind her like a linebacker brought a smile to his face. Her thoughts matched because he noticed her lips twitching.

She giggled. "Wouldn't look conspicuous or anything."

"Once a month, we'll find a way, I promise. Just get rid of the scale."

Relief smoothed the space between her eyes. "I will. How are your other clients?"

They walked. Stan kept his stride a smidge shorter so she could keep up. "Max is about done." He rolled his arm around. "He's got full range of motion in his arm. I'm glad the doctors made an effort at the time to save it instead of amputating."

"That's incredible. How's Helen?"

"We enrolled her in Life Alert and explained she has to wear the sensor for it to function properly."

Avery laughed. "I can sympathize. I wouldn't like something hanging around my neck. Maybe we can try for chili night again. It's getting cold enough."

"After Christmas, I think she'd enjoy another get-together. Her family is taking her to their place until then. Part of the time she'll be with her daughter and then head up to her son's for Christmas. Popeye will be ready for her when she gets back."

"Losing him will be hard on you. Will you get another dog?"

Why did she think giving Popeye to Helen would be hard for him? He was training the dog for a purpose. And yet, having

him there when he arrived home, playing in the yard, enjoying his company in the evening—he'd never had a pet of his own. Maybe he should. "I hadn't thought about it."

"I'm sorry," her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's okay." He gave her a friendly shoulder bump as they rounded a curve in the path. "We had dogs when I was little, but I never had one of my own. I got Popeye to train for Helen, he's a character. I didn't realize how much I'd enjoy having him around."

"After Christmas, we find you a puppy to keep. One with as much character and they can play together."

What did she think would happen if he got upset? He changed the course of his thoughts. "What should your goal be this month?"

"Get through Christmas without losing control."

Her response was instant, still concerned. Yet another reason to learn list-making.

They walked in silence a few paces until Stan noticed a bench to the side beneath a colorful maple tree. He veered them toward it. "Do you have paper in that pack you're carrying?"

She pulled the pack from her back before sitting beside him on the bench. "One sheet? I can tear it out of my journal."

"That'll work. How about a pen?"

She handed over pen and paper.

"What events do you have planned between now and New Year's?"

"Events? Like parties? We have a Christmas party for our clients."

"Only one?"

"Berkeley has invited us for a catered meal. A few other invites usually come in." She grimaced. "Last year was easier since I was dating Paul. We could split. Remy would do some and I would do some. She won't hear of me going by myself."

"Take me as your sidekick. I'll be your partner in crime."

"You'd do that for me?"

Why did she seem surprised, holding the backpack against her chest? He nodded. "I believe I would. Will you have Thanksgiving and Christmas with your family?"

"We usually go to Remy's. There'll be the Christmas Eve party."

"What about New Year's Eve?"

"Watch a movie."

"You don't get New Year's Eve alone."

"Why not? I don't have a boyfriend. I can spend it how I like. Which does not involve clubs or bars."

"How do games and fellowship sound? Our church has a 'watch' party."

She tilted her head as she considered. "Will people from the harvest festival be there?"

He nodded. The idea of getting to kiss her should not have entered his mind ... but it did. He looked at the list. Looked at the woman beside him. Spending time with Avery intrigued him. Learning to interpret the gestures and expressions intrigued him. Keeping her as a client wouldn't work. He needed a new client or a new job like the one in Seattle.

What would Avery think of Seattle? He returned her pen, stood, and tucked the now-folded list into his pocket before reaching for her hand to help her up. She wrapped her hand around his wrist, but let go as soon as she had her balance. Their walk continued, banter as usual, but the question of Seattle and Avery repeatedly rolled through his mind.

Chapter 41

Why do winter foods seem heartier, less healthy? Thick soups. Casseroles. Spaghetti with meatballs. During the summer, it's all veggies and grilled chicken. But right now, standing in a cold November rain, it seems like hot chocolate is the only choice. I'm drawn to the foods that are least likely to be good for me. How do I change that perspective?



A busy morning turned into a working lunch. It had been almost a week since their last meeting, not counting the gym, and disappointment tugged at her as she called.

His voice made her want to forget responsibility. "Hey, kiddo. I'm getting ready to leave for lunch."

She covered her eyes. "I'm not going to make it. This morning's been crazy. I sent Elaine for sandwiches."

"Holiday hustle?"

"Seems like it. How about coffee this afternoon? I can meet you around three."

"Richards?"

"Yes." She could walk, it wasn't far.

Later that day, stepping out of the building, she ran into a blustery wind from the north. Change in the weather. Still too early for snow, right? She pulled up the collar of her light jacket and bent her head down. Shivers shook her body by the time she arrived at the coffee house. Stan met her a few steps in. He must have noticed her blue lips because his frown looked fierce.

"Why didn't you drive?"

Her teeth chattered, but the warmth of the shop stilled most of the shaking. "It wasn't like this when I went to work this morning."

"It's called The Weather Channel. You should check it every day."

"Ha. I'll settle for something hot to drink. How about creamed tea? Two Splenda."

He pointed toward the back. "They have the fireplace on. It's electric, but it gives off heat. I'll meet you back there."

She hadn't meant to make him order her drink, it sort of happened. The fire did feel good, and she happily curled up in the stuffed chair set in front of it. He sank into the chair beside her a short time later.

She took her drink, removed the lid, and sipped on the steamed milk floating on top. She closed her eyes. Perfect. It had a gingerbread flavor. "You are spoiling me."

He gave her an odd look. "Did you bring list paper?"

Okay, straight to business. "Did." She pulled a narrow pad of paper from her handbag.

He took a sip of his drink. "Thanksgiving is next week. I suggest you plan lighter meals for the beginning of the week."

"Would you like to meet Remy and her husband? I thought I could have everyone over at the house Saturday. If you're okay. I mean, you probably have a date or other stuff going on, so it's no big deal."

"My family won't be in until Monday, and no, I don't have a date. I'd enjoy meeting your best friend."

Avery winced. "You sound like you expect to hear stories."

"BFFs usually are the inside track to secret lives."

Avery narrowed her eyes. "I will be sure to warn Remy not to reveal anything."

His lips twitched. "I have my ways."

Yes, you do, she couldn't argue. "How about chowder and cornbread for dinner?"

"You're making me think you know how to cook."

"It's a Rexanna special."

"Make your list Friday to Wednesday. What other plans do you have?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm thinking about mall shopping tonight. It's impossible to go near the mall Thanksgiving through Christmas."

"Add a movie, and I'd come along if you don't mind."

Mind? Him shopping with her? From the fluttering in her stomach, it might be a good thing that was bad for her.

They continued on her list until Avery pointed the pen at him. "What do you eat for breakfast? I have the hardest time finding a cereal I like."

"If you could have anything you wanted, what would it be?"

"I'd skip it and have lunch early." She grimaced. "Which would offset the entire day. Not a good habit to have."

"Skipping breakfast is not good. There's toast."

"Ugh. Dry bread, not happening."

"Why does it have to be dry?"

"Can you put something on toast?"

"You can put a lot of things on toast. Depends what you like."

"Ha, ha."

"No, really. There's cream cheese, butter and marmalade, and honey. You don't want the topping to be an inch thick, but you can have something on your toast. Go savory, try smoked salmon."

"Cream cheese is good." *Way better than Special K cereal.* "Monday and Tuesday, I'll be working. Mr. Berkeley is providing lunch on Tuesday when we preview his new campaign. I won't need to eat again until Thursday."

They joked some more, but within the hour, Avery had a decent list planned.

She bundled into her jacket. "Does it ever seem odd to you to plan when it's only you?"

"I've learned that when I have a plan, I do more of what I should and fewer things I shouldn't."

Avery wrinkled her nose. "I suppose. It still seems like a lot of effort."

"What? You didn't enjoy my company?"

"Enjoying you is not a problem." She looked outside at the leaves flying past the window. "Outside's a different story."

"My car's here. I'll take you to yours. Go home and get a real coat, and then we'll meet up at the mall around six?"

She glanced at her watch. Four-thirty. "Sounds like a plan."

"A good plan?" His smile let her know he teased.

She shook her head. "A truly good plan puts me in Florida for winter. Your plan is okay."

"Come on." He opened the door, and chills raced down her back.



Christmas season had already begun at the mall. Banners in reds and greens hung from the ceiling. Decorated trees lined the halls. Even Santa sat in his Elfdome, waiting on the line of children and frazzled parents.

"I'm not sure it can be much worse next Friday." Stan scooted closer as a crazed woman dragged her man around them.

"A lot worse."

"What are you here for?"

"I like to get my clients a little something." She glanced at him. "Not food related. Hallmark and the gift store are that way."

"The theater entrance is downstairs, so we can check the marque when you finish."

Avery turned the corner and almost tripped over her feet. "Oh Lord, not today." She prayed even as her nightmare came to life.

"What's wrong?" Stan placed a hand on her shoulder.

She looked around, was there a place to hide? "My ex-boyfriend is heading this way."

"Do you still have feelings for him?"

"No, but it's embarrassing. Look at the woman hanging on him. I knew he was going for someone thinner."

“Avery Jacobs, is that you?” Paul’s face seemed pudgy, and the double-take at seeing her was *way* over the top. “I didn’t recognize you.”

Stay calm. “Hello, Paul.” She was surprised to notice that he looked a bit like a used car salesman. Sleek but not quite honest. The coil of fear in her gut unraveled and she relaxed against Stan.

Paul nodded in his direction. “This fellow must be responsible for the change in you.”

Stan shrugged, looking at her, then giving Paul a look as though he didn’t know what he was talking about. “Avery’s as beautiful as always.”

Paul grunted, put his arm around the other woman’s waist. “Nice to see you, Avie-girl. We have to go.” He walked away.

That was it. A moment of unease and the world righted itself once more. She wanted to turn around and look, make sure the man had been Paul. Why had she spent eight years dating him? She held up her hand before Stan could comment. “I know. What did I see in a man like that? I have no idea.”

Stan’s grin made her want to giggle. “I’m glad you got over him.”

“Me too. Thanks for being a rock.”

“Not me, my dear. You are realizing your own strength.”

“Having a life-coach makes a difference.”

He agreed, but she wanted something more. She was afraid to think what more there could be.

They continued to Hallmark. Then the gift shop. Stan offering to carry her bags. Standing beside her on the escalator as they moved down to the movie theater. Moment-after-moment feeling like a date. *Not smart, Ave. He’s got his life, and you are a job. I am a job. I pay him to spend time with me.* Oh, the thoughts were making her feel sick because she didn’t want to pay him. She wanted him to *choose* to spend time with her. Disaster.

WEIGHED DOWN

Chapter 42

Pan-seared flank steak with sautéed vegetables. That is my idea of a decent home-cooked meal. I can control the amounts, cook up enough for a single serving. Single serving. Every night. Gets tiring, after a while. Going out is a lot less effort, but then I'm more likely to make unwise choices. If there was anything I could change about being single, that would be it. Can I hire a grandmother to eat with me?



Avery glanced at the clock above the stove. "He should be here anytime. I hope the chicken cooked."

"Worrywart." Remy bonked her in the hip as they stood near the stove. "It smells terrific."

Buzz walked into the kitchen and wrapped his wife in a hug. "I'm starving. When's dinner?"

"Stan's not here yet. You just had crackers and cheese." Remy elbowed him.

"Oh, yeah." His face lit up. "I don't think I finished those." He took off. "Stan better like football." He hollered back at them.

"Neanderthal," Remy whispered.

"I heard that."

Avery laughed as the response floated back from the living room. Remy shook her head. "Sure you want one of those?"

"If he loved me as much as your man adores you? I think I could put up with it."

The doorbell rang.

"Candidate number one."

"He's not a candidate. He's my life-coach."

Buzz yelled from the couch, "Someone's at the door."

"Thanks, hon," Remy called back.

Avery was giggling as she opened the door. "Whatever happens tonight, let me apologize now."

His eyes danced. "Apology accepted. Lead on."

He followed her into the kitchen. "Rexanna, Stan." She waved like they needed to know which was who.

Remy smiled, shaking hands. "The lump on the couch in the other room is my husband, Buzz."

"I heard that."

Avery nabbed the package he held and placed it on the counter. "You might as well introduce yourself and get the sporting details out of the way."

Avery stayed in the kitchen, lifting a lid to smell the soup. Remy grabbed her arm. "That's Stan? For some reason, I pictured a short, scrawny guy."

"I don't know why. He's strong enough to pick me up and tall enough to reach the annoying top shelves."

"Strong enough to pick you up? Why haven't I heard about this?"

"Not a big deal." A timer chimed. *Saved by the bell*. "Chicken's ready."

Remy smirked. "You're chicken, alright."



"No, no. I was eight years old. As soon as the wheel stopped spinning, I threw up everywhere."

"You didn't!"

Remy laughed. "She did. Not a clean pair of shoes among us, and then the teacher walked over." Remy shook with laughter. "Took one look, covered her mouth, and ran."

Avery put her head on the table, trying to breathe through the laughter. "No more SpaghettiOs for lunch."

"And the tire swing was cut down the following week. We've been friends ever since."

Stan shook his head. "What about you, Buzz? How'd you join this crew?"

"Rexanna was my tour guide when I first came to campus. The prim and proper girl leading a bunch of jocks from point A to point B. They tried every which way to get her attention, but she refused to let go of her cool exterior. I signed up for school and followed her like a puppy 'til she gave me a genuine smile. Been married seven years now."

Rexy leaned closer to him. "Were you ever married?"

Really? Did she need to go there? Avery wanted to intercede but knew better.

"Me?" He shook his head. "I've dated, but hadn't met anyone I'd want to be married to fifty years later."

"The day could come," Rexy assured him.

"Or not." Avery sent her a glance. Cool it. They'd have him running for the door. "Let's get the table cleared and pick a game."

Stan walked beside her to the hall closet, then whistled when she opened the door. "You horde games."

"They look interesting, even if I don't get to play them."

"What's on for tonight?" He touched one on a high shelf. "Is that 'Clue?'" We have to play."

She let him pull it from the stack. "The dining room with Mrs. Peacock and a knife."



They pulled the leaf from the dining table to make it smaller. Stan dumped the pieces from the box and set the board.

Buzz elbowed Rexy. "I think we have an ace."

"He hasn't played with the likes of us."

Avery stood behind Stan, glaring at Rexy. *Behave*, she mouthed. *Moi?* Rexy pointed at herself.

Stan turned with a questioning look, but Avery whipped around, placing the box on the buffet cabinet.



Cutthroat did not begin to describe going against the three of them in a game. Buzz seemed the most relaxed until it came to checking the clues. Avery called Remy on a guess, gleeful at denying her best friend. "Clue" ended, and they pulled out "Life." Stan filled his car with three tiny tots as he noticed a sweet glance between the married couple. Were they expecting? Avery blushed as she placed a mate in the car beside her. What would she like in a partner? If she didn't feel as though she had to settle, would she pick someone like him? Would she pick him?

The game wrapped up, Remy singing over them as her numbers added to more than the rest. Buzz tapped his watch. "Time to went."

Stan glanced at the clock on the wall. How had time gone so fast?

Avery nabbed the box. "I'm the lucky one who gets to keep her feet in her slippers."

"Next time, come to our place."

"I'm bringing 'Monopoly.'" Stan grabbed his jacket.

"Them's fighting words," Buzz called from the kitchen. How had he heard him?

Avery grinned. "He's got a super power, for sure."

"I can't believe it's after eleven." Stan slipped his arms into his jacket. "We should help clean up."

Avery shoved him through the front door. "I got this. You all drive home safe."

"Good meeting you, buddy." Buzz shook hands with him. "Next time, I'll point out the finer details on why the Sea Hawks aren't the team to back."

"Ouch," he mouthed after turning away.

Avery grinned. "Wimp."

"I heard that."

"Ignore him." Remy walked over and gave a quick hug.

Avery's smile wavered, and he noticed a slight twitch in her eyes. What would it feel like to have her arms wrap around him? He smiled and waved. Someday soon he was going to find out.



Avery watched everyone walk around the front of the house. Why couldn't she hug him? Her stomach spun thinking about it. Why did proximity to Stan make her feel things she shouldn't feel? Want what she shouldn't want? She waved instead, watching them cross the sidewalk and disappear around the front of the house.

Introducing her ex-boyfriend Paul to her friends hadn't been this much fun. 'Stan the Man is my life-coach' would have to be her new mantra.

Chapter 43

The best part about winter is falling snow ... as long as you don't have to drive in it. If you can stand in a yard and spin in circles and try to catch flakes on your tongue, then you can enjoy the best of winter. Falling flakes are beautiful. Some are large and fluffy, others are tiny and swift. They say each is unique, and yet they all fall together; and if they are fortunate enough not to melt, they form a mound. A group that sticks together until they melt into water. Even then, they burrow into the ground. Snowflakes aren't meant to exist alone, and neither are we.



Snow drifted through the air, muffling sounds of the neighborhood. Millions of flakes glowed in the twilight-darkened sky. Avery stood between the trees and lifted her face. Cold touched her cheeks, her forehead. *Angel tears, for all the earth must die.* Someone had told her once. Or had it been a song? *Life beat beneath the cold. Angels wouldn't cry long, spring would rise up.* But for now, as a hush fell across the yard and the thick flakes hovered, Avery didn't need to think. Peace for the moment embraced her.

The phone jangled inside the house. Her trek into the snowy quietness was too brief a respite. She considered ignoring the interruption, but it could be important. Her thoughts were splashing into the peace. "Until next year," she promised the world.

"Hey, this is Stan. Did you get Leonard Nimoy to make your message, or is it a sound bite?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" She muttered as the message continued.

"You haven't talked about going to your family's for Thanksgiving. I wanted to see if you cared to join the Fischer clan. My parents and brother decided to head this way. There will be football, but I promise it will be fun."

Thanksgiving dinner? The choices were usually binge watching Hallmark Channel movies or Remy's supremely dry turkey. Was this a date or an opportunity to help because she'd major-freaked about holidays? In public, no less. Does it matter? Hello, spending time with the delectable Stan.



Avery grimaced, facing the Fischer clan. Her harvest-colored palazzo pants with a sweet yellow blouse stood out against the jeans and jerseys worn by the others. "When people say football on Thanksgiving, they usually mean TV."

Stan shrugged. "We like to play."

Avery looked down at her clothes. She dressed for dinner, not running around a damp yard. The brief snow had melted, and temperatures had warmed.

Stan looked at her outfit, and she noticed a light bulb. "You don't have to play."

She scoffed. "I'm not watching while you have all the fun."

"Your pants and a tackle aren't going to be friends."

She pulled her feet out of her modest heels. "Comes out in the wash." He didn't mind if she played, did he?

"Tell my mom." He smirked.

"Are you two going to blather or get into the game?" Stan's sister-in-law, Beckie, had an Irish lilt. An interesting story to hear. Later, Avery dropped her jacket on top of her shoes.

She'd never physically played football, and when the ball landed in her arms, she wasn't sure which direction to go. They all seemed to be racing her way.

"Girl, you run it." Beckie locked onto her arm and pulled.

"Where?"

"To the tree."

They were laughing so hard when they arrived, Avery bent doubled over.

Beckie gasped. "You're one to jump in with both feet, aye?"

"You girls running from something?" Mrs. Fischer asked as she joined them.

"Don't look at me." Beckie shook Avery's arm. "I was hanging on for dear life."

Avery felt confused. What did she miss? Mrs. Fischer pointed behind her. "First tree." They were more than a few yards beyond. Oh. "Do we still get points?" Avery danced a gig when Mrs. Fischer nodded.

"Like this." Beckie latched onto her arm beside her. "Skipping, but instead of going forward, you kick up." Avery followed her directions and laughed more.

"Are we dancing or playing football?" Ethan grabbed his wife around the middle and carried her off.

"She is not a football," Avery shouted after him.

Stan joined her. "Having fun?"

"I am." She beamed at him.



"Why aren't you with your family?"

Beckie, Avery, and Joy, Stan's mother, scuttled around the kitchen. Avery took direction to help, but the question threw her off guard. "They're gone."

Beckie's mouth opened for a response, but something on the stove bubbled over and began to hiss and steam.

"What do I do?" Avery screeched, reaching for the handle then jerking back. Hot pot.

"I've got the pot holder. Turn the burner down." Joy nabbed the handle and pulled the pot off the burner.

"Everybody okay in here?" Ethan and Stan filled the door, although they looked more interested in the turkey resting on the counter than anything else.

"We're fine. You boys got the table dressed? I expect the silver to be where it belongs."

Joy had a June Cleaver-style, Avery decided. Shoulder length, silver-and-pepper-colored hair curled up in the back. The dress she now wore brushed her knees.

The boys disappeared. Joy turned around with a large smile. "You don't know what a blessing it is to have girls in the kitchen." She took a moment to pat each of them on the cheek, affection glimmering in her eyes. Then she clapped her hands. "Potatoes won't stir themselves. Avie, use a spoon. Beckie, let's get these veggies into the serving dishes."



A variety of dishes lined the buffet. She'd even helped prepare them, Avery looked around with a smidge of pride. She appreciated the small group as well.

Mr. Fischer led the prayer. "Bountiful Father, You provide until our cups overflow. Thank you for this precious time together. Bless the food. Amen."

A flurry of amens followed, and dishes were handed around. "Ladies first."

It didn't take long for everyone to fill their plates and sit around the elegantly prepared dining table. Avery didn't know if the silver was in the right position or not, but it looked good the way it was.

"Where are your folks, Avery?" Joy asked the question Avery feared most.

"Out of town, if you can believe that," Beckie answered for her.

"Lots of people like to travel this time of year. I hear it's the perfect time for a cruise." Mr. Fischer spoke on, but Avery glanced at Beckie, her heart sinking. *Where did she get the idea my parents were*

out of town? Contradicting her now would seem odd. She'd have to set them straight later.



An afternoon with the Fischer's left Avery feeling energized. Rather than head to an empty house, she turned a few miles early and drove to Remy's, who had texted "stop by for Hallmark Christmas mov." Avery flopped onto the couch beside her best friend, grabbing a few kernels of popped corn. Air popped required a touch of salt, but she didn't miss the butter.

"How was it?"

The TV played, but Remy seemed more interested in news.

"We played football, and I wore muddy pants to dinner. No one seemed to mind at all."

"How many?"

"Six. His brother's wife is Irish. How about your Thanksgiving?"

"Mum insisted on bringing smoked turkey."

Avery wisely kept her mouth shut.

"Left plenty of mine. I'll bring sandwiches to work on Monday."

Please, no. "Give some to Elaine to make her turkey salad." At least, mixing her turkey, chopped vegetables, and mayonnaise would make it palatable.

They settled back, attention wandering to the Hallmark Christmas movie.

WEIGHED DOWN

Chapter 44

Thanksgiving cinched it. How many women would dress for a fancy dinner and then jump into a game of football, even if it meant grass stains on her pants? He wanted to build a real relationship. He punched the number from the email into his phone and hit call.

"Aegis Therapies, how may I direct your call?"

He looked at the name at the bottom of the email. "Rick Stanton please."

"Just a moment, I'll connect you."

The man answered after the first ring. "This is Rick."

"Good afternoon. This is Stanley Fischer. You reached out a few weeks ago. I wanted to check on the status of your job position."

"Funny you should call." Papers shuffled. "My last interview backed out. When are you available to come in?"

"I'll be in the area three weeks from now." Almost two weeks before Christmas. He planned to be back in Georgia by Christmas. They set the date and time. Stan put it in his phone. Should he tell Avery or wait? She might not even care. She seemed interested, but they were still in a working relationship.

He turned to his computer and opened a web browser. Four minutes later, he had a roundtrip flight to Seattle booked. His parents would be glad to see him so soon after Thanksgiving.

Chapter 45

Life is about balance. Go to a party, eat from the selections that are available. Go to the gym, choose from the selections that are available. Seems like that should balance, but the effort to eat is a lot less than the effort of working off what was eaten. Balanced? Not so much.



Water from the fountain had splashed the class list on the wall more than once. Avery glanced at the list of offerings this week. Beginners yoga, not her thing. Zumba looked scary. What about stretching? She'd have to put it on her calendar. The more classes she could make between now and Christmas, the better.

"Ready?" Stan jogged up beside her. He appeared much too energetic.

"Let the punishment commence."

"A bit of punishment now will lead to incredible results in the future."

Yeah, right.



The floor felt hard against her back, but she couldn't push herself up. Legs bent, forcing air in and out of her body as her heart thudded. *Why am I doing this?* Avery squeezed her eyes shut but knew the instant Stan hit the ground at her side.

"How do you feel?"

“Death warmed over.”

He didn’t respond but waited silently.

Okay, fine. She took a deeper breath. “Tired.”

“What sort of tired?”

She turned her head and scowled. “Tired. I wasn’t aware there were flavors.”

“Sick tired? Haven’t-slept-in-two-days tired?”

Good grief. She closed her eyes. How about worn to the bone? Wait. No, worn wasn’t right. How do I feel? She focused her mind on her body. Muscles were weak, but nothing technically hurt with pain. She frowned. She breathed more normal and focused attention on how her body felt. Tired, yes. Jazzed, yes. Avery opened one eye and glared at Stan. Stalin. His responding smile was kinda cute on his square jaw. A few drops of sweat sprinkled across his forehead. Her glare turned into a smile. Rats.

“Here.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her into sitting position.

“I run out of breath faster than I run out of steam.” She reached beside her for the water bottle. Cool liquid felt refreshing against her throat.

“Keep at it, and you’ll build stamina. Try going a bit further each day.”

“You mean we have to do this again tomorrow?” She teased, but something inside turned over at the negative turn of his head.

“You do. I’m going to try scrounging up a new client.”

“I thought your docket was full?” Avery scrambled to her feet as he stood and placed hands in his pockets. The gesture made her nervous. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m not billing you anymore.”

“We’re finished?” Wait a minute now. “I thought we were going six months.”

His eyes glittered with something making her insides feel different. Soaring-upside-down-on-a-swing different.

“Didn’t say we weren’t staying together. I can’t justify charging you for what I want to do.”

"You don't want to work with your other clients? How are you going to make money if you stop charging people?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed his head before answering. "You are not like other clients. If you want to be a blockheaded Bracegirdle from Hardbottle, I'll charge you double."

"Your Tolkien is showing."

"Why don't you want to admit there's something between us?"

Jittery, like facing-down-a-cliff jittery. "I'm seventy pounds heavier than you. My gut is between us."

"Weight isn't the issue. The huge chip on your shoulder is going to keep you from something really good."

Were they fighting? Avery pulled her hands through her hair, using the slight sting to focus. "With all the pretty, skinny girls in the world, I have a hard time believing a man like you would prefer me." She said it. Those words existed in the world, and they made her feel sick.

"If I put on weight, you wouldn't want to have anything to do with me? Friending fat people is beneath you?"

"Of course not." Why did things sound awful from his perspective? "I'm talking about me."

"You? The one who's beautiful, spunky, creative? Mad driver? That you?"

How was she supposed to respond? He stood less than a foot from her, and his eyes made her want to believe a lot of things. "What was the original message? I'm a touch lost in all this."

"You're touched, alright. Tomorrow. You. Workout. Alone. Got that part?"

Registered. She offered a tight salute.

"Dinner afterward. Your place. With me. I'll bring the food."

"Okay." He's been to the house. Why were butterflies dancing in her stomach?

"Think about what I've said."

"While running the treadmill. Right. Got it."

Chapter 46

If God intended him to fall in love, why not with a normal woman who could easily see they were meant to be together? He huffed as he tossed his gym bag between the back seats of his SUV. Maybe telling her when she was nearly passed out on the floor hadn't been his best moment, but still, a bit more enthusiasm would have been nice. She seemed more concerned that she wouldn't have a life-coach any longer. He hadn't given her an opportunity to say yay or nay.

He needed to straight up ask her tomorrow night.



He stopped at the grocery store on his way back from Tate's. A couple wanted his help training for a triathlon. This could work. It would offer even a bit more money than Avery, leaving him free to explore where a relationship with Avery could lead. He picked out ingredients for a chicken divan casserole, selecting fresh broccoli over frozen. Flower bouquets at the checkout captured his attention. Not from a grocery store, but there was a flower shop on the way home. He placed the food in a cooler in the back of his SUV. He didn't want to risk the warm spell before Christmas messing up his chicken dinner.

The flower shop was on the corner, and he pulled in. The roses on display weren't his favorite. He looked around the shop. A thick bundle of white and yellow daisies sat on a back table. Possibly left over from Thanksgiving, but they appeared fresh. He bought them.

“Is there a box? I’m not sure how to keep them from falling over.”

“Here you go, dear.” The older woman handed him a short box. “I would set it on the floor just in case.”



The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. He cooked dinner, pulled out a table cloth his mother had shoved in the bottom of the buffet cabinet and placed it over the casserole holder. Hopefully, she liked chicken and broccoli. He set the food beside the box of flowers. The blooms didn’t seem worse off by keeping them in the car.

Excitement built as he headed her way. She cared. He knew she cared. It might take time to break down the walls she insisted on building, but he could do it.

Chapter 47

Foods I eat when nervous: Ice cream, possibly best food ever; chips for salty-crunchiness; Hershey's chocolate bar, or one of those big bars with toffee and nuts, big enough to break the squares and enjoy piece-after-piece. There really aren't that many other things I'd go for. I thought the list would be longer, but these are the ones I eat repeatedly. What if I could come up with a healthier substitute? What would happen then?



"Your meeting started ten minutes ago." Elaine peeked her head through the open door.

Avery checked the clock. Ten? What meeting? "Mr. Saunders isn't until Wednesday."

"No, you changed him to today."

"Tuesday?" Panic caused her chest to hurt. She looked at the stack of mock-ups. They weren't finished. She grabbed what she could and crossed the hall to the conference room. How could she have missed changing the meeting?

She glanced across the table as she set the boards that were mostly finished on display. She took a breath and offered a tight smile. "Sorry about that. Not as far along as I would like, but I think you'll see where we're heading."



"What's the matter with you? Saunders is a big client; we can't afford to lose this one." Remy's face showed a mix of anger, concern, and agitation. Almost as fierce as her own sense of angst.

"I know, I slipped."

"Slipped? I think the only reason he didn't walk out is because we've had three successful campaigns."

"I'll fix this. It'll be fine." It had to be. Avery rubbed her temple. This was Stalin's fault. He had her off kilter.

Rex took a seat across the desk. "What's wrong?"

"Remember when I first starting dating Paul? I spent a few days scatter-brained?"

"A few days? Try weeks. I can't afford weeks of scatter-brained Avery. Wait a minute." Remy's face brightened. "Dating? Whom are we dating?"

"I'm not."

"It's Stan, isn't it?" She clapped her hands. "I knew something more was going on. Hey, aren't you paying him? Is he some sort of gigolo?"

Avery giggled. "No, and I'm not paying him anymore. At least, I don't think I am." Thinking about his announcement was not going to help her get work completed. She drew a breath of air into her lungs. "Right now we need to focus on business.

"Yes, you do." Remy's eyes widened. "But we will discuss this at length later. I'll tell Elaine to give you extra attention until the phase passes." She walked away.

"Attention isn't necessary," Avery called after her disappearing back. They weren't dating. If he liked her, it wouldn't last long. He'd get over it like everyone else.

Or maybe she could hope?



A mix of nerves and excitement jarred her stomach. How would she possibly be able to eat anything he brought? What would he

think of her if she didn't eat? She groaned, pressing her face into one of the pillows on her couch. She looked around the room. Orderly, neat as usual. She'd cleaned up as many of Whiskers' hairs as she could find. The dining table was set. Lights glowed in the driveway, and she closed her eyes. Thank you, she didn't have to wonder anymore. She scooted to the door before he knocked. In one arm, he held a box with a massive arrangement of flowers. In the other, a pot carrier dangled from his hand.

"Anything I can take?" Although he didn't seem to be struggling.

"Not yet. I'll take this to the kitchen."

His smile made her curl her toes into the wood floor. Maybe she should carpet the house. She closed the door, ignoring the temptation to bang her head against it to knock some sense into herself. She followed him instead. "Smells good."

"It's a fresh chicken and broccoli casserole called Divan." He placed the pan on the counter. "My grandmother taught me to make it. Yes, there's cream and a touch of parmesan, but it's healthy, I promise."

She leaned against the island counter, standing across from him.

He moved the casserole to the right and leaned in as well. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?" What had he done? Aside from turning the past two days upside down.

"When I made my big announcement at the gym, I never asked if you were interested in me as well."

"Oh yeah." Heat rushed into her face. The words slipped out almost sooner than he spoke them. Should she be, was a different matter, but she *was* interested.

His face gentled, smile widening. "Alright then."

Avery felt her nerves melt.

He lifted the vase of flowers from the box and set them in front of her. "For you."

"Wow." She breathed in their fresh scent.

"This was for the table," he placed a folded cloth on the counter, "but I see you have the table ready. We'll save it for next time."

Next time works. Avery helped him find the dishes, then asked what he wanted to drink.

"I should get drinks, I'm the one who invited myself for dinner."

"We're making it a team effort."

He stood close enough to place his hand on her side when she turned around from the cabinet holding two glasses in her hand. She held on to them for dear life. Shattering more glass on the floor was not in her plan book.

"Team effort. Iced tea will be fine."

"Good choice." It was freshly brewed.

It didn't take long for them to be seated at the table. The chicken casserole looked yummy. How many times had they eaten together, yet this time felt different?

He reached across the table. "May I pray?"

"Of course."

He waved his fingers at her. "Take my hand."

This was new. She should listen to the prayer, but her mind was distracted. She heard an amen, and he released her.

Conversation became stilted. She should say something. Ask him about his day. But then he'd ask her about her day, and she'd have to tell him about the colossal screw-up. She should ask anyway.

They ended up speaking at the same time. They both laughed.

Stan shook his head. "I know this seems weird now. Trust me, I think we'll like where it's headed."

"I can't seem to wrap my head around the idea you like me. Well, I mean, you're interested. I mean, I found you because I was looking for someone to help solve my problem."

"I'm not the solution. Yes, I'm here to help get you on track, but ultimately staying on track is up to you." He cleared the dishes from the table and carried them to the kitchen.

She followed. "My head knows, but my heart keeps reminding me of failures."

"I know. You carry them around with you like luggage, but it isn't only about losing or gaining weight. You constantly put yourself down."

"You've never been heavy. How could you know what it's like?"

"Actually, I was, up until I went to college. I chose a degree in physical therapy and counseling."

Stan had been overweight? "How were you able to get it off and keep it off?"

"You're so focused on failing tomorrow that you don't focus on the success of today. God wants you to focus on today and save the worries of tomorrow for when it gets here."

"Easy words to say, difficult to put into practice." She held up her hand. "Not against you, but I have to make my actions speak louder than words."

He took her hand, linking their fingers together. "Learn to let God give you His strength."

"Do you honestly believe He can?"

"He did for me. Your journey will be different, but you never have to worry He will leave or fail you along the way."

"I want to believe." But God didn't like people like her.

"Good. I think a measure of faith will help you achieve peace."

Avery looked at their hands. His fingers were longer, skin slightly darker. He had a scar from his thumb to his wrist. "What happened?"

"Ah. This scar would be due to Mickey Lane. We had a karate challenge, and he tried brick and broke a finger, while I tried a pane of glass."

"Ouch! You didn't!"

He nodded. "I was fortunate not to sever any digits."

"Did your parents make you stop the karate class?"

"They did, and I was never, ever permitted to watch 'Karate Kid' again."

"Good thing. It isn't one of my faves."

He smiled, following her trail away from the thick discussion. "What's your fave?"

Avery grinned. "Steel Magnolias." His exaggerated look of horror brought laughter. "Kidding, although you'll think my fave is lame anyway."

"What?"

“‘Legend.’ An early Tom Cruise movie. It may have even been his first.”

“With Mia Sara and a big devil-looking thing.”

She raised her brows. “You’ve seen ‘Legend?’” No way.

“Yeah. I enjoy fantasy. You’ve probably never heard of ‘Krull.’”

“Have too. There was a round sort of weapon he could throw, and it would come back to him.”

He kissed her. Avery was too surprised to pull back, but then she didn’t want to. His lips were warm and firm, making the butterflies in her stomach swirl and dance. Making her want more.

The kiss ended and he rested his forehead against hers. One hand toyed with her hair.

“You kissed me.” *Way to go, Avery. State the obvious.*

“I did. How’d you like it?”

“Hmm. I think I need another to know for sure.” She didn’t need to say more. He pulled her closer and gave her what she wanted.



Avery stepped into Remy’s office and closed the door. “We kissed.”

“You kissed?” Rex looked up from her monitor, pleased surprise welling in her face. “You kissed? When did this happen?”

“We were talking about movies, and he kissed me.” Her eyes widened. “Then I suggested he do it again.”

“That’s awesome. I mean, good, right?”

“It certainly felt good.” Avery felt her cheeks warm. “I like him. Falling-hard like him.”

“Getting involved is a wonderful thing, Avery. You two are good together.”

“Really? What can I offer him?”

“Don’t go there. You’ll take something lovely and turn it into grunge. Something about you makes him wake up and take notice. Enjoy, and spend time figuring it out.”

“What about you and Buzz?”

"My honey? He cooks, does a mean foot massage, gets choked up when he prays and makes me melt and fall in love with him all the time."

"Stan talks about God." Avery sat in the purple stuffed chair near Rexy's desk and pulled her legs underneath her.

"How do you feel when he does?"

"I never considered it. You know I've always believed in God, but I never thought about Him as personal or being able to have a real," she made imaginary quote marks into the air, "*relationship* with Him. I mean, He's God."

"Make time to meditate and pray."

"I will." She tilted her head to look at her best friend. "We don't usually talk like this, do we?"

"Never."

"Stalin says I'm reserved."

Rexy laughed. "You call him Stalin and he still kissed you? He must have it bad."

"Right? He's got wires twisted in the brain."

"Sounds perfect for you."

Avery groaned. "I don't believe in perfect."

"But you want to."

"God help me, I do."

Chapter 48

Emotions influence my eating habits. The excitement that comes with a new love interest— no doubt I'm going to be picking at food, my mind not engaged the way it should be. Other life events can have a negative impact. I'm not entirely certain food is the only culprit. Any sort of major change, emotional-roller-coaster-type life change results in weight gain. It's as if my body puts less energy into metabolism. Of course, any small gain in weight becomes a big deal. Once the gaining starts, it seems to increase, and it takes a lot of effort to make it stop. It feels like my own body betrays me. I betray me. Whatever the life event is, I'm working twice as hard on swimming through. Sometimes, I don't seem to make it.



Her face looked skinnier. Avery closed her eyes, blocking her reflection in the mirror. How long would it last? Stan was ... amazing. What would happen when he left? She opened her eyes and glared. Maybe he wouldn't leave. Maybe. But they always did.

You've had two serious boyfriends in your life, girl. The third one's the charm. But what if ... he'll be gone, and you'll revert to old habits. Bad, old habits.

Why did she do this? Losing weight three times in her life. The first had been pills. Apparently deadly pills. The second had been more on her own steam, but why hadn't it lasted? She meant for it to last. She even remembered picking up the 20-pound bag of potatoes and promising herself it wasn't coming back.

This is Stalin's fault. She wagged a finger at herself in the mirror. *You're thinking too much.* She completed her morning rituals and got behind the wheel of her car. Time to focus. Get to work. Work. Get home.

She carefully checked the rear-view mirror. Nothing behind her in the driveway. Nothing coming in the street. Focus. She kept repeating the mantra on the way to work. Pulling into the assigned slot for her business, she sighed, and relief eased a bit of the tension in her shoulders.

The first thing she did upon arriving in the office was synchronize her desk calendar with the date on her phone. Thursday. She double-checked, no meetings. Several hours were needed to catch up on the Saunders account and prep the funeral home brochures. Avery opened the files and proceeded to complete them.

Sometime later, the words on the screen were swimming. Avery shook her head and glanced at the time on the bottom right corner of her computer screen. What? Two in the afternoon? Already? No wonder she was wilting; she'd been going since nine. She stood and stretched, leaning to the left and then the right. Her head felt woozy. She didn't feel hungry, but her thoughts were fuzzy. She punched the reception button.

"Yes?" Elaine's calm voice wafted into the room.

"Could you get me a sandwich from downstairs?"

"What kind?"

"It doesn't matter; I just need to have meat."

"I'll take care of it, boss."

"The sooner, the better." Avery returned to her seat and laid her head on the desk. Not much point in working when her thoughts were blurring in her head.

"Are you okay?"

It seemed like the next moment Elaine was placing a bag beside her head. Avery sat up. "Ran out of fuel. I'll get food inside and be right as rain in no time." What exactly did 'right as rain' mean? People didn't care for rain. It interfered with everything. Avery dug into the bag. Boy, did she need food.

“Eating fast does not allow time for the body to absorb nutrients and register a sense of being full. You will eat less if you eat slowly.” Stan’s voice echoed in her mind as she took a large bite. The problem was, she had so much left to do. If the option had been available, she might have even shot the nutrients directly into her arm. Designing a campaign ad for a funeral home required finesse, which required mind power. Something she severely lacked at the moment. She took another bite, downed a gulp of iced tea, and popped a chip into her mouth.

Food reached her bloodstream, and her ability to focus improved. What was she even eating, though? Chips? Those were empty calories. The sandwich? She continued to chew the bite in her mouth. Could she determine the type? The texture of the bread was whole grain. Lettuce, easy to identify. There was tomato—mealy, not the way she liked it. The meat, though. Chicken or beef? She honestly couldn’t tell. She glanced at the sandwich in her hands. White meat, so it must be chicken. She tossed the bag of chips into the trash and finished eating the sandwich. Given enough time, her body noticed the difference. She felt full.

Eating fast was a habit needing to be broken. She could have eaten all of those chips and regretted it afterward. Pausing to think kept her from having to experience a tinge of guilt. She took another swallow of tea and pulled a small journal from her purse. She opened to the next clean page.

Note to self. Slow down when it comes to eating. There is no need to inhale the food. You will have to make yourself think about it every time so you can change.

A little smiley face at the bottom and she dropped the book back into her purse. A week into Christmas season, and she was going to be okay.

Chapter 49

I like food. I just wish it wouldn't sit on my hips ... or my back side. And yes, it's the holiday season. (I know I keep grumbling, but that's what a journal is for, right?) Sitting down to a five-course meal that starts with French onion soup and ends with cherry cheesecake? Really? Do normal people starve themselves the rest of the day? Are they spending three hours each day for a week at the gym afterward? How do they do it? Why do they do it? After soup and salad, I'm pretty much no longer hungry. Do I eat the brisket and roasted potatoes because they look good and smell divine?



The first party of the season loomed. Stan planned to take her, but what should she wear? Her usual black and white seemed bland, and the sparkling red shirt had sequins missing. She shot a glance at Whiskers. Stupid cat. She went for her phone on the desk, pressed Rexy's number.

"What's up?"

"I have the Dawson party tomorrow night and nothing to wear."

"You have a whole closet of things to wear. You want something prettier." Rexy laughed.

Avery chewed on her lip. True. She was more interested in impressing Stan than any of her clients.

"You'll have to admit it if you want my help."

"Fine. Yes, I want something prettier." She grinned. Something to make his eyes light up.

Rexy sounded gleeful. "Pick you up in twenty."



The dress was perfect. Standing in front of her dresser, Avery dug into a cup of hairclips, pulling out a silver clip in the shape of a star and used it to pull her bangs to the side. She backed up and looked at herself. She had never worn anything like the dress. The crushed velvet sleeveless top merged into a black satin skirt at her waist then fell in an elegant sweep to her calves. She bought both a heavier and lighter jacket to match since the early December weather proved warmer than usual but wasn't likely to stay unseasonable. She donned the lighter jacket and pulled her hair from beneath it. It had grown a bit longer than shoulder length. A slight touch of eye makeup and lipstick highlighted her face. She looked pretty. She *felt* pretty.



Beautiful. When Avery exuded confidence, she became breathlessly beautiful. Stan leaned against the door, stood watching her until her cheeks grew rosy. Instead of looking away, she offered a saucy grin, tossed her hair and invited him into her house. Oh, yes. She was trouble. He followed her, closing the door behind him.

"Well done, Miss Jacobs."

She gave a slight bow. "Thank you. Looking dapper yourself, Mr. Fischer."

He touched his crimson-colored suede jacket that matched the top of her dress. "I clean up nicely when I want to. You," he paused for dramatic effect, "seem to be missing something." He reached into his fancy jacket and pulled a box from his pocket. She didn't wear a necklace, so giving it to her now seemed appropriate. He pulled the chain, letting the snowflake dangle for her to see.

She brushed her finger across the delicate pearl forming the center of the flake. "It's beautiful."

"Let me put it on you." She lifted her hair, and he laid the silver chain around her neck. "It's perfect."

She kissed his cheek. "I want to go see." She ran to the downstairs bathroom.

He walked through the living room as he waited. She'd placed garland across the mantle, nestling candlesticks behind. A pencil tree, yet to be decorated, stood in a corner behind a chair. He checked the pictures on the wall. No family photos. Her parents had been gone at Thanksgiving and no mention of them for Christmas. Was she estranged from her folks for some reason?

She returned, joy shining in her face. Stan packed the questions away. Tonight wasn't the time. She tried her usual excited jump as she neared him, but her shoes slipped on the wood floors. He grabbed her elbows, steadying her. This was his Avery.



Avery enjoyed the forty-five-minute drive into Atlanta. No awkward silences. She asked him about favorite Christmas music, and he sang until she threatened to sneak caviar onto his plate. She tried not to touch the snowflake, but every once in a while checked to make sure it still rested against her chest. Sweet man. Sweet gift, including a silver chain. Did he realize she never wore gold or was it happenstance? Mattered not. The handsome man at her side was her date.

They arrived at the hotel in east Atlanta. Mr. Dawson, their host for the evening, provided valet parking for their guests. Stan tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, and they stepped into the main lobby. Santa, in a modernized red suit, guided them to the conference room. The gathering space had been transformed. Tables, ranging from large rounds that seated ten to intimate two-seaters, were spread throughout the room. Themed Christmas trees

in majestic splendor were scattered throughout the room. There were the usual buffet tables combined with a few unique arrangements. One looked like a pile of gifts with trays of food displayed on top. A wooden tree held a variety of miniature cupcakes. Strings of lights and garland draped the walls, which made the room look magical.

Stan placed his arm around her waist, and they entered together. The function was big and impersonal. Avery shook hands with a board member, then introduced Stan. The man had attended a meeting with her agency but failed to place her. She shook her head, exchanging smiles with Stan. There was no point in feeling hurt. The board members crossed paths with hundreds of businesses in a year.

Stan pulled her closer. "I'm famished. What do you say we explore the buffet tables?"

Avery allowed the sensation of his nearness to wash through her. They'd mingled with others who wanted to be noticed by someone more important, so with her duty accomplished, they could now have some fun. She looked at the sea of food on the buffets and gulped. "How do we do this without losing sight of our goals?"

He took her hand. "Follow me, Madame." He walked up to the first table and handed her a plate. "First key, don't fall for usual choices." He waved off the turkey.

"What about that?" She pointed at a large flank of salmon dressed with thin slices of cucumber and dill sauce.

He nodded. "Interesting choice."

She used the scoop and added a small portion to her plate, being sure to get cucumber and dill sauce as well.

"This looks like a mini quiche." Stan placed a plain one on his plate.

"I'll try the one with spinach."

They continued looking at the endless platters of food, and by the end of the second table, she had a variety of choices on her plate. Looking at her food, Avery was surprised that she could still see the bottom of her plate.

They found a little table off to the side with a bit of light dangling overhead. She took a bite of quiche. Wow, flavors filled her mouth.

"How do they get this much flavor baked in? I cook eggs all the time, and mine are never this good."

"Can you taste the spinach?"

She nodded. "But it's not overpowering."

He made a face, and she smiled. Stan the Man didn't like spinach. *Her* man. She pointed at something with lots of what looked like pepper on his plate. "What's that?"

He took a bite, then dropped the rest of it on a napkin. His eyes got big and began to water slightly. "Hot." He quickly swallowed the entire glass of water. She offered hers, and he took another lengthy gulp. "Sorry."

"Never understood why people eat food hot enough to burn."

"Me neither." He still sounded breathy, but his eyes were no longer teary. He took a piece of cucumber from the salmon on her plate and popped it in his mouth. "Ah, better."

She ate the rest before he could snatch more.

"Try the chicken on a stick."

She took a bite and savored teriyaki flavor. The variety of small bites proved satisfying, as did the company. She wasn't stuffed. She watched Stan cross the room, sidestepping a couple who'd been to the open bar too many times. She needed to learn how to cook. Caterers followed recipes, didn't they? It wasn't magic. Stan brought her out of her musings when he returned to the table carrying two small cupcakes.

"Caramel or chocolate?"

"Split, and we'll have a bite of each."

"Perfect, a woman after my own heart."

"I might be." *Filter, Ave.* Her knack of response without thought would get her in trouble, but not tonight. She grinned as she licked icing from half the caramel cake. By the gleam in his eye, Stan didn't mind her answer in the least.

Chapter 50

Stan studied the cross hanging behind the preacher's podium. The sermon continued, but his mind wandered. What would Avery think of the simple little church? If he could get her to come. He hoped he could, but her excuses were set in place every time he asked.

She didn't mind him praying before meals. There was something sweet in the way she held his hand, the way she seemed to want to say amen after him. Wanted to, but didn't. He'd fallen for her, hard and fast. He'd always wanted a wife who would share his faith, someone to pray with, worship together, and face life with a strong foundation on the Rock. He rubbed the back of his neck. His heart had run away. How did he reign it in? *Lord, help us.* He closed his eyes and let the image of the cross linger in his mind's eye. *I want to be a godly husband, and I already imagine her as my wife. Help me, Lord, to do the right thing.*



The idea of cooking lessons came to mind on Monday. It had been a week since Stan stopped her as a client. What would he think about cooking lessons? Maybe if she paid him a small fee, he'd consider it? She tugged at a black cat hair on her white workout clothes. She could ask him before they left for the gym. The doorbell rang. Perfect timing.

Avery met him at the door and ushered him into the kitchen. She took the first water bottle and held it beneath the filter on the sink. "I want to start paying you again."

“What?”

She gave a quick glance back. “I mean I have something new I want to do, and I’m willing to pay for your help.”

“Why not ask for my help?”

“Because it could be a lot?” Her voice got a bit squeaky on those last words, but he was moving closer, an arm on either side of her trapping her against the counter. He shut the water off and removed the bottle from her hand, placing it on the counter.

“What is it you want?”

Good grief. Her mind went blank. His eyes had streaks of hazel wrapped in a brandy color. “I don’t remember. You’re standing too close to think.”

He smiled, and edged a tad closer, though he wasn’t touching her. At least not physically, but he was purposely close enough for her to feel his body heat.

“You should spend more time *not* thinking, not evaluating every move you make.”

“Why are you standing this close?”

“I kissed you before and am considering the possibility of repeating it today.”

Avery stretched up because leaning toward her, his lips were a few inches above hers. She placed a small kiss at the corner of his lips. When she did, she caught a hint of cinnamon. The hazel in his eyes seemed to deepen. Oh, wow! She teased another part of his mouth. Uh-huh, something spicy. In another moment, she knew for sure he’d been drinking chai. With his arms wrapped around her, it didn’t matter. She gave herself into the pleasure of the moment.

Oh, my, there’s something sexy about sitting on the counter wrapped up by Stan. She rested her head on his shoulder, felt his heart racing as fast as her own. His arms loosened as they let the heat bubble down to a simmer.

“Lord have mercy, woman. You’re bound to get me in all sorts of trouble.”

“Me?” Avery didn’t want to lift her head from his chest. She’d never felt comfortable being personal with men. Now, all of a

sudden, this one man made her long for things she'd never dreamed possible. Well, dreamed maybe, but not truly believed.

"You." He placed his hands on her cheeks and made her look at him. "Quirky, adorable you. And if you tell me you aren't adorable, I won't give in to whatever it is you wanted."

He kissed the tip of her nose and stepped away.

She wanted something other than him?

"Oh, yes. Right." When exactly had he lifted her onto the counter? "My idea. I wanted to hire you, I mean, ask you to help me learn to cook. Healthy, taste-good cooking. Not like being on a diet kind of cooking, but it can wait until after Christmas. I want to get rid of everything hampering progress, but I'm not good at cooking things without gravy or mounds of cheese."

He rubbed his hand through his hair. "That's not going to be a good idea."

"Oh." Was he joking? No. There was nothing slightly looking like amusement in his features. "I thought ..."

"I believe in having a pure mind."

Were his cheeks getting red? Avery gave herself a mental shake. Focus, girl.

"Us working alone in a kitchen would not help."

"Because," Avery's eyes widened as a thought popped into her mind. His answering smile reminded her a bit of the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. "You want ... with *me*?" Oh, boy. Was there a difference between an intangible dream and a possibility?

"So, no private lessons, but we could take a class together. Go on a date."

"Sure. A date. With you. That would be," awesome. Amazing. Incredible. "nice." Ugh, what a bland word to use. *Avery, you should have a more complex vocabulary.*

"I'll look into it and let you know."

"We don't have to wait until then." She slipped off the counter but had trouble finding her feet. He grabbed her elbows to keep her from falling. "To go on a date. You know, go see a movie."

“Or Frisbee golf? The city completed a course at the park last month.”

Okay. “Or Frisbee golf. Sounds like fun.”

“It’ll do.” He gave a soft grunt, and then kissed her hard.

Chapter 51

There's a difference between saying 'just because I'm overweight' and 'because I'm overweight.' One sounds like an excuse and the other sounds like trying. Maybe I need to start realizing that just because I'm overweight doesn't mean I can't have a life. If I were a size six, I don't think I'd go around saying 'because I'm skinny, I can, or I am.' Why do I allow my weight to define who I am now?



“Mr. Berkley, I hope you see these new campaigns will appeal to the spirit of spring. I think your regular customers will be touched and should bring new ones into the stores.”

“Ladies, you’ve made an old man happy.”

“You aren’t old.” Remy walked around the large conference table and shook his hand.

Avery stepped in after her. “I’ll have promos and market slots to you by the beginning of January. Let me know if you want anything changed.”

Watching a satisfied customer leave the office added to the joy bubbling over inside Avery. Remy squealed as she embraced her, and the two of them jumped up and down.

“That’s the best news all week.” Remy flung herself into a chair and let the momentum spin her around until she was dizzy.

“Second best.” Avery followed suit in her own chair, enjoying the splashes of color as she twirled in a circle.

“Second?” Remy stopped. “What could possibly be better?”

“Stan and I are officially dating.”

This scream was a touch louder, and REXY grabbed an arm, causing Avery's chair to stop suddenly.

"Dating? For real?"

"Yes. He," she couldn't say everything on her mind. "He likes me."

"Likes you?" She made a happy face. "How do you feel about him? Do you like him?"

"Of course, I do."

"Do you love him?"

Did she love him? "No." She frowned. Was that the truth? "Yes? No. I mean he hasn't said he loves me."

"So? This is a first for you."

"He's not my first. I've dated other guys."

"You've gone out with, please forgive me, guys who weren't good enough for you. They weren't smart enough, not pleasant enough."

"Paul was okay until he totally dumped me."

"He was dull and had you bored to tears. I don't think you even kissed any of them."

"I'm not really kissable."

"Does Stan make you feel like you aren't kissable?"

Avery laughed. No, he did not. "There's something wrong with his upstairs." She tapped her right temple.

"You mean there's something *right*. I'm happy for you, he's a good guy. Get your first date out of the way, and then we can do a double date."

Chapter 52

Riverside Park wasn't busy for a Thursday. Stan drove to a more open section with fewer trees and far enough away from the river to ensure the water wouldn't become littered with Frisbees. Along the gravel path were posts wrapped in netting to catch the Frisbees. He parked in a small lot.

"I'll get the door for you."

He jumped out of the car before she could say anything. Modern women weren't supposed to enjoy meaningless shows of chivalry, but Avery's smile when he took her hand getting out of the car showed him that she didn't consider them meaningless. He felt a smidge sorry for women who insisted on doing everything themselves. December in Georgia should be colder than this. Avery basked in sunshine as he jogged to the trunk of his car. He grabbed two Frisbees, one bright green and the other orange. She grabbed the green one.

He bopped her on the head with the orange one. "Fine."

As they headed for the first basket, he faced her and walked backward. "Do you know how to throw a Frisbee?" If she said she didn't, would it involve up-close training?

"Um, yeah, I do."

Too bad. The problem was, even with both of them knowing how to play Frisbee, the discs wouldn't glide smoothly into the nets. They had to be bounced off the post slowly enough to drop into the nets. Avery cheered at her first attempt. Beginner's luck!

"Not fair," Stan called a foul. "The squirrels helped."

"Did not. I'm talented." Ha. She bragged too soon.

The second round had her chasing the flying disk like a puppy dog. He managed to land closer to the basket that time.

"What's that?" She pointed in a different direction, and he turned to look.

Her Frisbee mysteriously appeared in the basket when he turned back. "This is the way it's going to be?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't know what you mean."

He got her back by distracting her with a sweet kiss while he plopped his Frisbee over the net. She didn't complain.



By the time they reached the ninth post, Avery had never laughed so much. They were both breathless from running and chasing green and orange discs. His hair stuck out in unique directions, and she was sure she should have worn a hat. Shady areas were a mite cool, so she bounced as she waited for the next throw.

"Alright." Stan stood straight and put on a serious face. "No playing around this time. Winner gets to buy dinner."

"Winner? What's to keep me from missing until you get it in?"

"I could do the same thing."

"We'll be here until midnight. Shouldn't the loser buy dinner?"

"I wanted to be a gentleman and buy it for you."

"Oh." She stood up to him, hands on her hips, "So, you assume you will be the winner?" She smirked, not so fast, buddy.

"Of course. I've been holding back on my talent all this time."

"I don't doubt it." She switched to a British voice. "The glove be laid. Take your shot, sir."

He kissed her instead, a warm kiss that tingled all the way to her toes. "I can't resist a British accent."

"I'll be sure to practice." Yes, she would, indeed.

He stepped away laughing. She thought he mumbled something about trouble but couldn't hear him clearly. Whatever, it made her feel all gooey inside.

"Very good. Final round, here we go."

The wind picked up, and they called it a draw, neither able to land the Frisbee anywhere near the basket. It couldn't possibly be they had cheated the first eight rounds.

"Frisbee Golf was fun." Avery leaned against the car as he tossed their things into the trunk. "I don't think I'm good for a nice place out, though." Her shirt proved she'd rolled in the grass more than once.

"You don't think Bellamy's will seat us?"

She loved him. Avery Jacobs loved Stanley Fischer. What would she do when he left her? The thought blazed out of nowhere and burned like wildfire through the feeling of joy that welled deep inside Avery. No. She cut it off.

He moved to her side of the car, oblivious to the moment. *Thank you, Lord.* She meant it. Realization was one thing, but she was waiting for him to say it first.

"Sandwich shop?"

"What?" Avery refocused. He stood beside the car door, holding it open and waiting for her.

"How does Jimmy's sound?"

Like I could get in trouble. Oils, mayonnaise, bacon.

His grin told her he was reading her mind. "We'll look at healthy options that are just as good. Choice: Fast food burger? Avoid. But a good sandwich shop? You can learn to make right choices without sacrificing flavor ... or leaving you hungry."

"Lead on, brave sir."

He kissed her. "You sounded British to me."

"I told you I'd be practicing." She sank into the car and let him close the door. Good grief, how was one person supposed to handle all this emotion?

Chapter 53

Walking to places makes more sense than walking around a track, far better sense than using a treadmill like a hamster. I've come to realize I like to walk, especially if it means exploring someplace new. I don't care all that much for hanging out at the gym. Is there something in us that makes real exercise more appealing than forced? Our ancestors had to work a lot harder than we do. Were they in better shape? If they had the medicines we have today, would they have lived a lot longer?



"I've never been this active before in my life." Avery shared with Remy. Stan and Buzz walked a few yards in front of them on the trail.

"At least if they're first, they get the spider webs cleared away for us."

"Ew." Avery shivered. "Don't remind me there are spiders in nature."

Remy laughed. "When I suggested a double date, I thought more like dinner and a movie. Or maybe shoot some pool."

"I know." Avery used a thick stick to steady herself over some rocks.

Remy grabbed hold of Avery's shirt. "Frisbee was good?"

"We're both horrible at it and had a ball."

"Now we're hiking."

"I wasn't aware there were tracks back here." Avery waved as the men turned to watch their progress.

"You doing okay, hon?" Buzz eyed his wife.

"Avery is surprisingly steady. You keep pulling down those spider webs and clearing the path of snakes."

Buzz made a comical face and looked at the ground.

"Don't worry," Stan gripped his shoulder. "Anything out here will be more scared of us than we are of it. Make enough noise, and the wildlife will scatter before you."

Avery shook her head. "You know that's the stupidest ..."

Rexy grabbed her arm. "Sounds about right, actually."

Rexy's glance from Avery to Buzz gave Avery all the information she needed. "Keep it up, guys, you're doing great." She hollered a little louder for effect.

Within thirty minutes, they arrived at a babbling stream. The path turned onto a bridge, allowing them to cross over the water, and then entered a clearing. Several picnic tables arranged for a view of the river offered a welcome respite.

"There are facilities if you follow the jaunt through the trees." Stan pointed. "Basic, but useful, if necessary."

Avery found herself momentarily alone with Stan. She didn't give herself an opportunity to think twice but wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. "This is beautiful. I've lived here four years and didn't know there were trails."

"You like to hike?"

She nodded. "Exploring and fresh air. The stationary bike and treadmill are dull compared to this."

"It's okay to prefer the real thing."

"You're beginning to make a believer out of me."

Rexy and Buzz returned. Avery pulled away, but Stan grabbed her hand, keeping her beside him. Rexy's widening grin made her cheeks heat up, but she had no intention of releasing his hand until she needed to.

Rexy rubbed her arms. "Cold weather is heading back our way. I was beginning to think we skipped winter and headed straight for spring."

"Once it gets cold again, we can plan to head to the Winter Gardens." Buzz wrapped his arms around his wife.

"What is it?" Stan sat on top of the picnic table.

Avery leaned against him. "It is a beautiful spot out by the university. A park they make into a Christmas wonderland."

"Sleigh ride, lights, decorated trees," Remy sighed. "Not as much fun when it isn't cold, though. I don't know how the people in Florida stand it."

Stan laughed. "Half the world celebrates Christmas in the summertime."

"Not me," Remy shook her head. "Maybe if I lived down under, I'd do Christmas in July. Who knows?"

"I say we keep walking," Avery stood. "The wind's going to get a bite to it pretty soon."



Her prediction proved true. By the time they made it back to the parking lot, Avery wished she'd brought a jacket.

Buzz jogged in place. "Those weathermen had their timing off. How does Wednesday evening sound for Winter Gardens?"

"Bible study." Stan fished keys from his pocket and leaned against the car.

"I respect that. What about Tuesday or Thursday? I figure it'll be less crowded than the weekend."

"Tuesday works. Give the wind a few days to stop blowing, but it will be good and cold."

The couples got into their cars to head home from the day's adventure. Waving through their windshield, Buzz and Remy drove off. Avery slid into Stan's car, glad to be out of the wind.

"Would you like to join me for church tomorrow?" Stan asked as he turned to look behind them before backing out.

Church? "I can't. We set up a meeting for Monday, and I'll be scrambling most of the day to complete the mock-ups." Truth be told, she sort of wanted to go ... odd. "What about next Sunday?"

"I'll be out of town for the weekend. I'm heading home to Washington."

"Everyone okay?"

"They're fine. Mom enjoyed meeting you. Dad, too. Our church has a nice Christmas Eve service. It's still a few weeks away, but you might enjoy a candlelight service."

"Do you sing carols?"

"Not very well, but we do. What's your favorite?"

"Silent Night. It's a peaceful song."

"Listening to it, it's easy to picture Mary holding her baby under a starry sky. My favorite is 'Go Tell it on the Mountain.'"

"I'm not familiar."

He tried to sing a few lines but purposely made his voice as horrible as he could.

Avery put her hand out, "Stop, please." They laughed.

Too soon, she was back at the house. He pulled her close for a brief kiss. "I'll see you next week. Have a good presentation."

"I'll see you Tuesday. Maybe we can have dinner before Winter Gardens." She didn't pull away, and he dropped another kiss on her lips. This could easily become addictive.

Chapter 54

Some bad habits are easier to stop than others. Diet soda is not an easy habit to quit. I know it has been proven to dissolve meat, but that doesn't change the fact that a glass of diet coke with ice tastes refreshing. Even more so than water, although water with lemon is okay.



By Sunday afternoon, Avery thought her head would split. She knew her headache and black mood were due to the lack of caffeine. Specifically, her usual brand of diet soda. She paced the house. What had possessed her to cross it off the list? The pantry was devoid of it. It didn't matter how many times she checked, it hadn't magically appeared. She groaned and walked away yet again. She needed a distraction. Cat fuzz drifted across the tile floor. Okay, that would be something needing to be done.

She walked to the cleaner but didn't really want to vacuum. Maybe something sweet was what she needed to help take the edge off. She opened the pantry once more. Not even a bag of chocolate covered raisins? What was she thinking when she purged the cupboards? Of course, there would come a time when she needed something. So, get the keys and drive to the store. What else did she need? Toilet paper? Toothpaste? Any excuse and she would be able to get what she *really* wanted.

What was she doing? She forced herself to stop in front of the shelves stocked with food. *What purpose would eating needlessly serve?* Calm her nerves. Make her feel better. *Really?* Her thoughts warred. What would happen once she ate, once she indulged her desire?

The guilt would pour on. The sense of failure. She would no longer feel the need to break the diet soda habit or to break any of the bad habits plaguing her.

"I don't want this." She hit her head against the corner of the wall. Not hard enough to hurt, just noticeable. "I don't want this." She repeated it, listening to her voice in the quiet house.

She should get out of the house but not to shop. She needed activity. Stan was teaching her ways to be active. Hiking. Frisbee golf. He hadn't talked her into skates or tandem bikes yet, but she knew he would, even though it would end with a sprain or worse. There were other things to do at Riverside Park. Maybe activity would help. It certainly couldn't hurt. She grabbed her jacket and headed outside.

Cold air and sunshine greeted her. Riverside Park it was. She headed to her car.

Avery slowed around the curve, looking for the perfect parking spot. The park was bustling with people and beautiful blue skies. Cold temperatures didn't seem to stop anyone from getting out. She glanced at the other side of the street when something familiar caught her attention. Was Stan sitting at one of the tables? Her excitement only lasted a second. He sat across from a woman. A beautiful woman, whose thick wavy chestnut-colored hair fell down her back and her perfectly made up face captured attention all the way across the park. It had to be a client, but the woman leaned in, trailing her finger against the back of his hand.

Avery no longer noticed the headache. Anger welled with fear. What was he doing here? He'd talked about going to church, not meeting up with someone else. Why would he be seeing someone else? Well, they hadn't said anything about being exclusive.

Avery found an empty spot and jerked her car to a stop. If he had a girlfriend, he darned better say so.



Lord, anything. He drew his hands back, but the strange woman made to stretch herself closer to him. No more impromptu meetings, not even for Tate. "I'm sorry, this isn't ..." he glanced to the left. Glory be, was it possible? Avery walked toward him. Stalked, really, with a dark blaze in her eyes, but he didn't care. He was off the bench in record time, almost running to her. Anger turned to confusion as he swallowed her in a bear hug.

"Thank you, Lord. Thank you, thank you." He held her close, rocking slightly. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

"A bit confused, but I think I do." She leaned against him like she trusted him.

He put enough space between them to kiss her forehead. "Lord, forgive me. Follow my lead, please?"



Stan the Man looked uneasy. Avery peeked around at the strange woman. What had she been doing to him?

Stan took her hand and walked back to the picnic table. The woman was more beautiful up close than from a distance ... until she looked at her eyes. Those weren't nice eyes.

"This is my girlfriend, Avery." He put his arm around her waist.

Avery leaned against him. This was an unexpected and delightful turn of events.

The woman offered a cold smile. "Too bad."

Avery linked hands with Stan.

"I'm sorry my company doesn't fit your life-coaching needs. I'm sure you'll find someone else." Stan looked down at Avery. "Ready to go?"

"Yes."

He kept hold of her hand and led them to a path taking them close to the river. When they reached the trees, he paused and pulled her into his arms. "You have no idea how hard I prayed God would intervene."

The ache in her head was taking hold once more, but she recognized it for what it was. And it was not worth leaving the warmth of being next to Stan. She had her arms around his waist, and he had buried his beneath her jacket so his thumbs could rub delicious designs on her back. His cheek moved against the top of her head.

“What happened?” There was no point mentioning the jealous streak raging when she first saw them.

“She was supposed to be a potential client, but I’m not the kind of life-coach she was hoping to find.”

“A beautiful woman like her shouldn’t need a life-coach.”

He shook his head. “That wasn’t beauty. You’d only have to sit a moment, and you’d soon recognize she’s hard and bitter. Physical looks don’t mean much compared to a bitter soul.”

They continued walking the trail, swinging their linked hands between them.

“Am I your girlfriend?” Avery felt less compelled to be concerned. He’d been genuinely pleased, his face lighting up as soon as he saw her.

“If by ‘girlfriend,’ you mean the woman I have fallen in love with, yes, you are mine.”

He said it! It wasn’t the way she’d ever dreamed of being told, it was better. She bumped him, too choked up to respond.

He seemed to understand, putting his arm around her shoulder and dropping a kiss somewhere in the vicinity of her hair.

Wow! This moment, by the river, sun dancing across the waves, love at her side. They needed a camera to record everything, including the feel of absolute perfection. In life, something is always bound to interrupt perfection, but this moment was worth everything.

Chapter 55

Good moments can't last. Does that make me a pessimist or a realist? Emotions are weird. When one emotion becomes stronger, the others follow suit. Life becomes an unbalanced roller coaster. I don't like roller coasters. I honestly don't like thinking about why I am the way I am, but I need to, in order to change and become better than the way I am. However, it isn't an easy journey. Over indulged eating is a bad habit, that's all there is to it. Why can't I just change the habit? Why am I drawn to explore deeper? If poor eating habits are a symptom of something else, how much more emotional do I have to get to uncover the truth?



Avery looked up from the report she'd been reading as something raced past her office window. "Rexy?" What was going on? She jumped from her chair and followed. She heard Rexy as she pushed into the bathroom. "Rex? You okay?" Was something going around? She hadn't noticed any of the others get sick.

Rexy's response wasn't pleasant, and Avery felt her own stomach turn queasy. She grabbed some towels, soaked them in cool water, and wrung them out. Rexy stepped from the stall but didn't look too good. She led her to the loveseat in the corner of the lounge area and gave her the towels. "Do I need to drive you home? Should I call Buzz?"

Rexy shook her head. "He knows."

"He sent you to work sick? What sort of husband does a thing like that?"

"I'm not sick. Not really. Not more so than usual, anyway."

"I heard you puke." Or was she ... no! "You're pregnant?"

Rexy offered a beautiful smile.

"Oh my goodness, you're pregnant! I'm going to be Aunt Avery." She grabbed both hands, delighted for her best friend. "I'm going to be Aunt Avery, right?"

"Of course."

"This is so awesome. How long? When are you due? What do you need? We should go shopping. You get to use the baby room."

"It's still close to seven months, so there's plenty of time."

"I know how long it takes Buzz to paint. We'll get supplies next week. Is it a boy or girl? Do you want to know?"

"We haven't decided. I go back for an ultrasound in a few weeks. We'll figure it out by then." Rexy closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

"Don't worry about anything here. We'll get an intern to train well before maternity leave. Do you need to take the rest of the day?"

"I'll be okay. I have saltines in the office. By tonight, I'll be ravenously hungry." She made a face. "Tomorrow it starts all over."

Avery winced. Women did this all the time? Why? "Let me know if you need anything."

Not much later, the office walls seemed to press in on her. Avery grabbed her shoulder bag and headed out. She popped into Rexy's office. "Need anything? I'm walking to the sandwich shop."

Rexy tossed a pretzel into her mouth. "I'm good."

Sun and blue sky did not keep a chill from the air. Avery buttoned her brown jacket and crossed the street. Rexy was having a baby. They'd played being pregnant as kids, putting a pillow under their shirts, and making plans to be pregnant together. Raising their kids like twins. There was something grown up in realizing the time had come. Rexy's time had come. Not hers.

Would she and Stan have children? "Don't go there." *You're going to jinx it.* She warned herself as she entered the shop.

The line for lunch moved quickly. Avery wandered to the park and selected a bench. She pulled off a piece of bread and tossed it to a pigeon.

"I wouldn't feed the pests. You'll be flocked in no time," the man on the next bench warned.

Something about him was familiar.

He held out his hand.

"You work at Dawson Exec, don't you?"

"Yes."

She lifted both hands, one holding a drink, the other her sandwich.

He smiled. "I'm Dave. We have insurance offices on the fourth floor."

"Right. A&R Advertising. We're on third."

"I noticed."

He noticed? What did he mean, exactly?

"How about we meet up for drinks after work?"

"Drinks?" Did he just ask her out? What alternative universe was this? "Uh, no. Thanks, I'm good."

"You know where I am when you change your mind. It'll be fun."

Why would having drinks with a stranger be fun? She frowned, watching his retreating back. Did he just ask her out on a date? Why would he ask her on a date?

Her thoughts turned to the baby. Auntie Avery. Thinking of a cuddly plump body curled in her arms was worth a smile. The child would be spoiled until Rexy and Buzz booted Auntie from the house.

Chapter 56

Stan closed his laptop. The email from Helen made him smile. Her grandson had to show her how to send it, but she continued to learn.

Tate jogged up, falling into the seat beside him. "Hey, man." They bumped fists. "How did meeting Carlie go?"

Stan shook his head, "I'm not what she's looking for."

"Too bad. I figured if anyone could bring some good out of her, it would be you."

"I have a girlfriend, and they would not mesh." He grinned, "Does your wife let her hang around here?"

Tate laughed. "Not a chance. I think Sophie has a sixth sense when any of those girls plan to be around. Somehow she always manages to be here."

"Sophie's the jealous type? I wouldn't have thought."

"It's not jealousy. She wants the world to know I am a taken man. Not an ounce of doubt in her. God knew what He was doing when He brought us together."

"I'm not sure Avery's given much thought to other guys." She liked him, but was it more about the attention he gave her? She hadn't said anything about love. Was he pushing her and she just going with the flow?

"Avery? Isn't that the woman you brought shopping a month or so ago? I thought she was a client."

"She was, and managed to get under my skin."

"You are an amazing catch, Stanley Fischer. I hope she knows that." He rubbed his hands together. "I signed up for a Class 3 climb in February."

"Great news. Sophie going to go with you?"

"I picked a climb with a four-star hotel at the base. I think I may convince her to tag along."

"She's your ultimate cheerleader."

"I wouldn't do it without her." He jabbed Stan's arm. "She'll want to meet Avery."

"We'll do something after Christmas." Was Avery his ultimate partner? How could he know for sure if she wasn't willing to say she loved him? Or was that the sign she wasn't?



Stan joined her for dinner. Every day, they were finding ways to spend time together. Paul had never been like that. Dating Paul had been a daily phone report and one or two nights to do something. With Stan, it was like they were building a life together.

"I think I was asked out on a date today." Avery cut her grilled chicken into small pieces.

"You think? What did you say?"

"No."

"Why? Maybe you'll like him."

Stan wanted her to like someone else? She glared at him. He made no sense. "I like you just fine."

"Because you know me. Get to know him, you may like him as well."

What? Avery shook her head. "I don't like you because we've spent time together. I mean, I love spending time with you." She huffed. Why was it difficult to express important ideas when they mattered most?

"You like me because I pay attention to you."

"Well, yes."

"So you will like anyone who pays attention to you."

"No." She scowled. "Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"I don't want you to settle."

Was Stalin a tad bit insecure? Avery placed her elbow on the table and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. "Darlin', I am one-hundred-percent-crazy-in-love-over-the-moon about you. And I probably didn't make much sense, but you get the gist."

His eyes brightened. "You never said I love you."

"I love you, Mr. Stanley Fischer." Her stomach flip-flopped, but her heart felt ... full.

He smiled. "You don't have to be afraid to say it."

She shivered. "It's terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. Those three little words get bandied around like popcorn." Looking away, she pushed food around on her plate. How often had she heard those words? Almost never since ... "They aren't insignificant to me."

"I believe you."

Her mind traveled places she didn't want to go. She shook off the mood. "Oh, other important news. REXY and Buzz are having a baby."

"Who was the man today?"

"What?"

"The one who asked you for a date?"

She frowned. They were still on the date thing? "I don't know. He works in the same building. Want me to get his number for you?"

"No. Just checking." He grinned, and Avery resisted the urge to toss a potato in his direction. "How's REXY doing?"

Avery made a face. "After being sick an hour this morning? And yesterday. I hope this phase passes quickly for her."

"They sound like they're still on for tonight. I suppose baby shopping is on the docket?"

She laughed. "Of course. We've already decided to select the most complicated crib as possible and watch the two of you fumble putting it together."

"Nice. We'll lose a couple of pieces and leave you girls to do it yourselves."

"How handy are you?"

"These hands are good."

Her mind went places it shouldn't go. By the gleam in his eyes, he suspected what she was thinking.

"For building," Stan pointed a finger at her.



Buzz and Remy met them at the gardens a little after dark. Crisp air surrounded them. Remy seemed happy, no signs of nausea, or worse. She looked as slender as ever, and Buzz remained glued to her side. The four of them walked through a tunnel of lights and entered the winter wonderland. Avery gasped as the path opened into a courtyard. Christmas lights of red, green, and blue dazzled. Scalloped strings of lights hung around trees, poles were wrapped from the ground, reaching into the dark sky. The gathering clouds did not dim the sparkle. Buzz and Remy stepped onto a lighted path to the right. Stan took Avery's hand, and they followed a few steps behind.

"I don't know if I should feel intimidated. I'd never be able to hang lights like this." Stan reached up and tapped a Chinese ball glowing yellow.

"I'm of the mind to keep it simple at home and enjoy someone else's efforts."

Stan gave a bit of a bump. "Talk like that, and they'll start to charge."

"I'll buy an over-priced hot chocolate."

"Did I hear hot chocolate?" Remy called.

"I have a feeling the paths will lead to refreshments," Avery assured her.

"Remy, is that the pregnancy speaking?" Stan joked.

"Hardly." Buzz laughed.

Remy elbowed Buzz, and they continued walking.

Stan made to lean against an oversized snowman and gave her a quizzical look. "What about you? Is hot chocolate one of your favorites?"

"Not really." She tugged his hand before he made the blowup fall over. "I enjoy hot cocoa when it's cold, but I wouldn't feel deprived if they were out when we get there."

"What will REXY do if they're out?"

"Let's just say they better not be."

They continued on the colorful path until drawing abreast with REXY and Buzz. A pool of water caused by a stream trickling from the far side of the park glowed with submerged lights. Luminous Christmas balls floated in the water.

"Wow. Now there's an idea. Can you imagine if we had a pool?" REXY leaned against her husband.

"We are not getting a pool for Christmas." Buzz sounded firm.

"Too much maintenance." Avery agreed.

"Nah." Stan moved their hands back and forth. "Imagine soaking in the sun during the summer and spending the afternoon floating lazily."

"We wouldn't be lazy because we'd be working to pay for the pool guy to take care of the pool. If I want a pool day, I'll spend the night at the Renaissance."

"I love a fancy hotel." REXY agreed. "They have hot tubs the size of small pools."

"Where is it?" Stan asked.

"Savannah." Avery winked, "Fancy, schmancy, but sometimes a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do."

"Moving on, before we end up in Savannah for Christmas." Buzz pulled REXY back to the path.



An hour later, chocolate in hand, Avery noticed falling snow. Stan went to use the facilities, and the other two squabbled over a

treat to complement the hot chocolates. She set her drink on a stone fence and walked beneath the open skies. She twirled between the trees, soft cold flakes falling through the air.

"I thought it wouldn't start until later." Stan joined her.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to take his hand. They spun until the tiny flakes streaked through the twinkling lights. Laughing, Avery grabbed Stan's arm and slowed to a stop.

"You two are crazy." Remy broke into the moment. "Buzz and I are heading out before this turns into a mess." She hugged Stan. "This was a delightful evening. Christmas Eve, you'll come to my house."

Avery hugged her next. "I'll explain it to him."

Remy hurried after her husband.

"We can leave, too, if you want."

No, she didn't. She looked at Stan. He didn't seem overly concerned by the weather. "As long as the snow stays light, I'm good staying."



Stan held her hand as they continued on the path. Colored lights arrayed in flurries of snow added a magical element to the evening. He heard a horse snort and pulled Avery to a stop. "Hear that?" The horse neighed. He looked to the right, where a slight path cutting through the brush could lead them to a horse and carriage. "Come this way."

He led them on a narrow trail which crossed from one path to another. She kept hold of his jacket with her other hand. "If you cause a horse to run away, I don't know you." She giggled.

"Trust me."

They exited to a different path where a horse-drawn sleigh waited. The brown and black beast pawed the ground but didn't seem to mind their sudden arrival.

"Do you have time for another round?" Stan waved at the driver.

The older man tipped his hat. "If this snow keeps up, the sleigh'll be the best mode of transportation." He seemed amused by his joke, rubbing his hand on the horse. "Help your lady in the back, sir. The blanket'll keep you both warm." He winked, "If ya need it."

Avery pulled herself into the white sleigh. Stan jumped behind her, placing his hand on her waist when she rocked. Moments later, they sat on the bench, holding hands beneath the thick blanket. "All snug?" He brushed hair behind her ear.

She cozied against him. "Perfect."

The carriage rocked forward, but it didn't stop him from stealing a quick kiss.

Lanterns on either side of the driver provided illumination as they turned away from the Christmas section of the gardens. The horse's clomping became muffled as the driver turned them onto a path through the fields. Snow. Cold. Warmth. Peace. Someone's fire tinged the air with the scent of burning wood. Stan didn't want to speak, and Avery leaned her head against his shoulder.

This was what he wanted. Avery resting her head against his shoulder for years to come. He'd enjoyed other women he dated, but no one made him want forever. None ... until this one. The meeting next week loomed largely in his mind and lessened the peace and contentment he should be feeling this evening. He needed to talk to her about it, let her know what was happening.

Avery crossed her leg over her knee and pulled his hand onto her lap, leaning against him even more. He kissed her and let the other thoughts fade. There was a reason God said to focus on today and let tomorrow wait. They traveled in quiet until the driver made his way back to the starting point.

Lights flickered overhead as the controller announced the end of the evening. Stan wrapped his arm around her shoulder as they walked back to the car. The light flurry of snow hadn't thickened on the windshield.

Avery rested her head against the back of the seat, tilting her head to watch Stan drive. "I love watching the snow fall. It's so peaceful."

"I have a blanket in the trunk. We can sit outside your house for a bit." He wrapped his warm hand around hers.

"I would like that." The evening didn't have to end quite yet.



The stoop of her house wasn't the most comfortable place to hang out, but they could watch as snow continued to fall. Stan laid one blanket across the steps, sat leaning against the rail, and invited Avery to sit beside him. Rather than face away from him, she turned slightly, crossing her legs over his. He covered their laps with the other blanket. Avery studied his face as he leaned back to watch the night sky. The jumble of emotions inside herself wasn't just because he was familiar or she had become used to him.

"Does God bring people together?"

"Like us?" He shifted his focus to her.

"Yeah. I've been thinking about what you said earlier, and I don't want to get to know someone else. I don't need to. I know it's corny, but you're perfect for me."

"I'm not perfect, Ave." His frown was too serious. "I'm going to let you down at some point. I'll say something or do something stupid, and you'll wonder what you ever saw in me."

"What if I don't believe my heart will change? Or how do I know you won't feel the same way about me?"

"That's my point. I will. I'm human. You're human. We're going to make mistakes."

She made a face. "You like to play devil's advocate."

"Things to think about."

"You don't think God brought us together?"

"I definitely think God brought you into my life to drive me crazy. Keeping you here is going to take both of us working together with Him."

She tried not to smile, but his words pleased her. "You want me to stay in your life?" Why did the thought make her giddy?

"Say those three little words getting bandied around too much."

How could he go from being serious to sounding silly that fast? She batted her eyes. "What three little words? Make it pepperoni?"

He kissed her. A make-your-knees-go-weak sort of kiss. Short enough to keep from doing things they shouldn't do. She sighed when he pulled back. "I love you, Stan."

"I love you too, pest." He kissed her again.

And once more.

The front stoop was pretty comfortable after all, Avery decided.

Chapter 57

A perfect moment lasts in a person's memory. True, but a memory is never as good as the actual living-it-out part. How do we make moments last longer? How do we keep from rushing through life, from letting the outside world disrupt? How do we prevent ourselves from causing the perfect moments to slip away?



"How long do we offer for maternity leave? We've never addressed the issue. I don't think it's mentioned in the bylaws." Avery stood in Rexy's office, leaning against the door jam.

Rexy looked at the floor. Avery recognized the sign. There was something needing to be discussed, but Rex didn't want to start it. "What?"

Rexy fidgeted. "I don't know what we are going to do." She turned her face to the window, not looking at Avery.

This was bad. "What are the choices? Isn't eight weeks typical? You want longer? We're financially sound, we may be able to double the time."

"I don't want you to think ... I mean, you know better than most of us."

"What do I know?" She wasn't going to like this.

"How quickly family can be taken from you." Rexy's brown eyes swam. She touched her stomach. "If I can stay home, I should. Shouldn't I?"

"You're leaving the business?" Avery felt her heart drop to her feet.

Rexy moved from the desk to take Avery's hands. "Nothing's determined. I'm just thinking out loud."

Avery buried whatever emotions were trying to crawl from the past. She gripped Rexy's hands and forced a real smile. "You are not to worry about business. Baby Rex is more important than your job."

"Baby Buzz." Rexy choked.

Avery made a face. "Really? You want a boy? Boys are gross."

"Ha. I'm sorry, I know what A&R means to you."

"To us. But it isn't going to be a problem. We have plenty of time, right?"

"Seven months." She nodded.

"There you go. We should focus on shopping." Avery wrapped her arms around Rexy. It wasn't something she could think about right then. Rexy would notice. "I'm hungry. Let's go to the café for lunch."

"Neither one of us can afford to eat there."

"It's a special occasion." She linked arms with her best friend. "We need to make a baby shopping list."

Rexy's brows rose. "You, making a list?"

"Ha. I'm learning lots of healthy habits."



The list started with a crib and onesies, but soon their paper was running out of room. The lunch hour wasn't into full swing yet, so only a few tables were taken. Avery's chicken salad plate was pushed to the side. She munched on a cracker as she tapped the pen on the table. "Isn't there something to stick the diapers in that's supposed to keep them from smelling?"

The woman at the next table leaned over, a wide grin on her face. "The Diaper Genie. It's a wonderful invention. I'm on my second baby, and it's one of my favorite baby shower gifts."

Avery widened her eyes. "We have to have a baby shower. I need to put a baby shower together for you." She had to plan a party? Lord, what was she to do?

Rexy used her fork to point at the woman. "Did you do one of those register things?"

The woman nodded. "Lots of good stuff, but do you know what you need most?"

Avery and Rexy looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Diapers. Spit-up cloths. Onesies. Lots and lots of 'em."

Makes sense.

The woman smiled at Rexy. "This your first?"

"Yes." The look on her face was joy. "We don't know boy or girl yet."

"What names do you have picked?"

Wait! Possible names should be an Avery question. Rexy squeezed her hand as if she knew her thoughts.

"We haven't decided on anything yet."

Avery giggled. "Do you remember the names we had picked out when we were little? What was it, Glendon? Gordon? I know one was Gloria."

They all laughed. "I liked G names." Rexy shrugged, and they laughed even louder.

A austere-looking manager glared in their direction. "Keep it down over there, or your meal will be to go."

Avery and Rexy glanced at each other and erupted. Not long after that, they carried Styrofoam containers onto the elevator to return to their third-floor offices.

Chapter 57

Avery leaned back on the couch beside Stan. He'd called on his way home from Wednesday night Bible study, inviting her for a popcorn buffet and the latest craptastic Christmas movie. When Stan put his mind to something, he didn't skimp. Eight small bowls sat on the coffee table, each one holding a different flavor of popcorn.

"Any of them hot spicy?"

"Not a one," he promised.

She reached for one looking like caramel. Yup, lightly sweet. She took a second piece and tossed it into the air, intending to catch it with her mouth, but he snatched it away. "Hey!" She plucked a piece from a different dish, popping it in her mouth before he had a chance to interfere. Hmm, cheese. "You up for another business Christmas party this Saturday?"

"I would, but I'll be in Washington." He took a handful of kettle cooked variety.

She'd forgotten about his trip. "I can drop you at the airport. Is it Friday or Saturday?" She rubbed her fingers against the plush of his couch. He'd be gone for a weekend. No biggie. Why did it feel as though he may never come home?

"Friday. Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't offer if I wasn't."

He tapped his finger against his lips. "I think I've heard those words somewhere."

"Some smart aleck dictator guy said it, I think."

"Good man. I'll accept your offer. Flight's at eight. Think you can pick me up at five?"

"I think you can take a taxi." Silence from the other side of the couch made her nervous. She laughed. "Kidding. I'll leave work early, no problem."

"That would be five in the morning."

She giggled. Oh, it felt good. "Five in the morning. Why didn't you say so in the first place? Who knows, I may even have a cup of coffee for you."

"No maybe about it. You mentioned it, now it has to happen."

"The power of positive speak."

"Exactly."

"I will see you bright and early at five o'clock."

"You heading to the gym after work tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'm joining a Zumba class. Have you ever tried it?"

"I've seen it."

"I am learning coordination." She pulled her legs up and did a little dance in the air.

"I'll join you some time. That would be fun to see."

"You're welcome to take me dancing any time you want."

"But tonight we get the movies."

Stan pushed the end of the couch and raised the legs. He patted beside him, and she scooted so she'd be able to share the space. She liked cuddling at his side, his arm across her shoulders. His fingers would twirl a strand of hair, distracting her from time to time, but for the most part, they enjoyed the movie together.

He kissed her as the credits played. A breathless kiss feeding a hunger for more. His hand touched bare skin on her side, and he buried his head against her neck. Oh goodness, she felt a giggle rising in her chest. They acted more like hotheaded teenagers than rational adults.

He looked frazzled when he raised his head. Her lips twitched. "You started it."

"Sweet torture." He pushed off the couch. "Home for you. I'll see you Friday morning."

Chapter 58

Trying anything often seems like a monumental task. The effort that goes into making life changes is too easily swayed. Why is it negativity wars in our soul? How do we battle what seems like human nature? Is it really that much easier to remember the bad rather than the good? Is it possible to turn our focus to those moments that make life more engaging? When we allow the negativity to take hold, failure soon follows. I don't want failure. Not now.



"I'm glad no one stood near me, or I would have knocked them to the ground." Avery laughed.

"It takes everyone time to learn. I've seen pileups." A friendly woman joked as they folded their gear after Avery's first Zumba class.

"They should have a beginner's class," a different woman looked down her nose, "and one for people who aren't ... normal." Her glance whipped from Avery's toes to her head, and Avery was certainly not misunderstanding. Joy in the moment deflated.

The friendly woman scowled. "She's mad because they don't have a class for bit—"

"She's right." Avery interrupted. "I don't belong in a normal group. At least, if I stick to the late hours, she won't have to see me."

"Don't be silly. You want to learn Zumba, come to Zumba class. We're here to have fun and get into shape."



Why is it the negative sticks better than positive? An hour of fun brought low by one snide remark. It wasn't fair someone put her down for doing something to improve her quality of life. "You got that, Ave?" She poked a finger at herself in the mirror. "No more letting words drag you down. You are worth the effort."

Her heart meant it, but her brain kept running it over, and over, and over. She finally got up at three in the morning to soak in a hot bubble bath, which never stayed hot for long. *Forget a pool in the yard, I want a hot tub.* Tiredness pulled at her as she arrived at Stan's house. Honk the horn? Uh, no. *Five in the morning. I'm sure neighbors would not approve. Grouch.*

She exited the car. Cold swirled around her, biting into her skin. He would take her into his arms and kiss her when he opened the door. A warm kiss would push away tired muscles and evil words. Her mind wandered as her feet bounced, waiting at the door, anticipating.

"It's cold this morning." He wore his coat, had his suitcase in one hand and an attaché case in the other.

No kiss, barely even a greeting. Avery stepped out of the way so he could lock the door.

"I hope the coffee's still hot. Is the car running?" Stan walked ahead of her on the sidewalk.

Oh, crap. Coffee. "Um, no coffee. I thought we'd stop, I wasn't sure what you'd like."

"At this hour? Black and strong." He checked his watch. "No time to stop. I can get it at the airport once I'm checked in."

Was he mad at her? Had she done something wrong? Conversation remained clipped on their drive to the airport. What should she do? What did she want to do? Be brave. She took his hand. His fingers were cold. She folded her fingers around his. He latched on to her with his other hand as well. Okay, not mad at her. Was he afraid of flying? She peeked a glance as they waited at a light before entering the airport. Maybe a bit pale around the lips? He was afraid of heights. Flying wasn't a far stretch.

They pulled to the terminal, and she attempted to get out, but he stopped her. "Stay in the car, no need for you to freeze as well." He tugged her close for a hug.

"Are you nervous to fly?"

"Not my favorite thing." He admitted, his forehead against hers.

"Then why do you do it?"

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't like."

"Let me know when to pick you up, and we'll do a happy dance."

"I promise."



The butterfly kiss did not satisfy. It was going to be a long two days. Avery followed the signs leading out of the airport. Still the queen of jumping to conclusions. Why did her mind instantly go to the greatest negative result it could imagine? What if she jumped to the most beautiful conclusions? No, always thinking positive would be dumb, she'd constantly be let down. How about sticking to reality and expecting people to be decent? Maybe she would go to Zumba class today. And maybe she'd stand next to Miss Skinny Thing and see how many times she managed to knock into her. Those thoughts put a smile on her face. Oh, yes, getting in the way would be delightful.

Chapter 59

Blinders allow us to get through life focusing on the things that matter. They can also keep us from realizing the things that should matter, but don't, because we never see them.



I look to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of Heaven and Earth. Avery tapped the card on her desk. Three months since meeting Stan, twenty-five pounds lighter, and almost a size eighteen. She should be celebrating, tickled pink. But she wasn't. She tapped the desk again. Stan had been gone four days, and other than a call letting her know he'd arrived at his family home in Washington state, she hadn't heard from him. What happened to his weekend getaway? She should call him, or maybe send a text. Or leave him alone, since family occupied his time. Did they talk about her? Could they be telling him he could do better? She liked his parents, but why would they like her?

She groaned and dropped her head onto her arms folded on her desk. Obviously, with other boyfriends she hadn't cared enough. Now she cared too much. *Is it possible to care too much, Lord?* What was it Stan had said? There would come a time he'd do something stupid? This was stupid, alright. Probably on both of their parts.

Lord, I know I'm insecure. When did she start talking to God? Somehow, it seemed the best thing to do at the moment. *I wish I could have the courage to believe Stan won't disappear on me. Make me fall in love with him and then, poof, be gone. If this wasn't the right thing for me, someone should have spoken up a long time ago.*



Avery tapped her fingernail against her front teeth as she stared through the freezer door at the grocery store. Ben and Jerry's Coffee Toffee ice cream. It had been a long time. Surely, long enough to warrant a special treat? A six-month treat. Good idea. Every six months she could treat herself to the best ice cream in the world. She could write it in on her calendar.

She ignored the voices warning against it and selected a pint from the freezer. It was one. Not a big deal. Still, she tossed a bag of beans on top. Aisle after aisle felt like a tug of war. *I am twenty-nine years old*, she finally scolded herself. *If I want some ice cream, I'm going to have ice cream. Shut up, stupid.*

Dinner was light, broiled chicken over steamed vegetables. She checked her phone after washing the dishes. No messages. No texts. What did people do before modern technology? With a determined blank mind, she grabbed the pint of ice cream and a spoon. She plopped onto the couch holding her prize, legs crisscrossed beneath her. A push on the remote control and a home improvement show came on.

She took her first scoop. Rich flavor melted across her tongue. Rich and sweet. Goodness, she hadn't had anything that sweet in ages. She savored the next scoop then let it slide down her throat. A chunk of toffee and she was in heaven. Delicious, and ... she wanted to cry.

Go away thoughts. Another scoop and she focused on the show. At the commercial, she glanced down. Half the carton gone? How had she eaten half? She didn't remember eating so much of it. She checked the TV.

Three months of better habits and she'd succumbed so quickly. She stabbed the spoon into the remaining ice cream and placed it on the coffee table. She pushed the table away with her foot. This

was how it would start, and she'd be back where she'd been. Her eyes stung, and she blinked. This is not what she wanted.

It didn't take long to don sneakers. She'd never run before, but today seemed like a good day to start. Maybe she wasn't meant to have a boyfriend. She paused on the front step to do a few stretches. So much emotion wrapped up in another person. It wasn't like Remy's. Her family had taken Avery in when her parents died in twelfth grade. They'd formed the company together after college. Remy was more sister than friend. She didn't worry about Remy deciding to leave her.

Avery turned on her flashlight, its beam lighting the street a dozen feet ahead of her. Probably not the wisest, running in the dark. But then, her neighbors were less likely to notice her. Her thoughts returned to Stan as she settled into a rhythm. She had little confidence in him. He liked her, yes. But look how easy he forgot when they were no longer together. Her life was fine before him. Mostly fine. Well, would have been fine if he'd kept to a business relationship.

You're being unreasonable. "No, I'm not. I'm being smart." She argued and muttered, trying to draw enough air into her body to keep her legs pushing. Gasping for breath, she finally stopped. The cold felt like it burned her lungs. She looked around. *Where am I?* The old church was nearly a mile from her home. *I ran a mile? There's no way I ran a full mile, that's crazy.* The door was open, and light poured across the cement stairs.

Why not? There were worse places to rest before walking home. The building seemed empty. Why had it been left open? Someone forget to lock up? She sank into the rear pew. The front of the sanctuary had a quaint altar. The minister's chair and simple lectern were on the dais. The windows on both sides of the church were stained glass, but the dark beyond made it difficult to see any images. She looked at the wooden cross hanging on the far wall. Something akin to peace tried to flush out the angst growing since Stan's silence.

"Can I help you with something?"

She jumped out of her skin. "Oh my goodness, Father, you startled me."

"A simple preacher." He offered a kind smile as he sat in the pew ahead of her and turned so they faced each other. "Sorry I scared you. Trouble in your thoughts?"

Why not? It wasn't like he could tell anyone else, could he? "Have you ever been in a relationship?"

He laughed. "Married forty-four years."

"How is that possible? I mean, I know people have been married since ... since Eve, and all. How do you let go of the turmoil?"

He thought for a moment. "Think of it this way. Can you be trusted to love someone?"

"Me? I think so."

"In order to know, you have to trust someone to love you. Who do you trust to love you?"

The conversation was not going the way she wanted. She rubbed a hand on her stomach. "Rexy loves me. We're best friends."

"But?" He waited with patience, with quiet he would not break himself.

"Rexy has Buzz, her husband. They're going to have a baby. I know she still loves me," she reassured them both.

"She has more important obligations."

Avery nodded, hating the tight feeling in her chest.

"What about your parents? Do you trust them to love you?"

"I did." This was not good, not good at all. No, no, no, no, no. She swallowed the lump trying to choke her.

"What happened to them?"

She pulled her lips between her teeth, pressing down to feel pain. "They died."

"You were still growing up?"

"High school."

He took her hands. Avery didn't want to feel. Not him. Not the sense of loss, the sense of sadness welling up. The sense of abandonment. "I'm sure they didn't want to leave you."

She whispered because her throat was clogging. "Of course not."

"Humans make mistakes. They'll let you down, even if they don't mean to."

"Stan said the same thing."

"Stan?"

"My friend. Boyfriend." She sighed. "Something."

"He's letting you down as well?"

"I don't know. Maybe." She blinked. "It feels like he is."

"The only one I know who won't let you down is God."

"But God's not real. I mean, He isn't here. Not in a real way, where He can let a person down or disappoint them."

The preacher shook his head, smiling. "God is more real than you or I. Do you ever talk to Him?"

"I guess. Sometimes I have."

"Did you tell Him how you feel?"

She shrugged.

"You'd be amazed at the lengths to which God goes. I should have closed up half an hour ago, but I dropped a box and broke a couple of glasses. I had to go clean it up." He chuckled. "Old man legs don't move too fast. Took just enough time for you to step inside."

"I didn't even know I was coming here."

"God has bigger eyes than you or me. The better to see us." He took his time standing. "Cranky bones. We're open Sundays if you need to talk more."

"Of course, Sundays." What just happened? Avery tried to process it all, but the entire conversation had been weird.

The night was quiet, peaceful. Tears felt closer to the surface than they'd ever been. The last time she'd consciously thought about her parents had been college graduation, missing them so badly that she wanted to crawl into a bed and lay there forever.

Was it possible she'd never worked through the pain of their death?

By the time she arrived home, weariness had filled the spaces of her mind torn by conflict. She fell into bed, ignoring Whiskers' grunt of disapproval at being disrupted, and fell asleep.

Chapter 60

If God loved me, he would make losing weight easy, wouldn't he? Would I even be in this mess if He loved me? Or does He allow this problem because there are things I need to learn?



A knock on the door drew her attention from the computer screen. Stan leaned against the door jam. Stan. All six feet of him, just outside her office. She shook herself. He was real. "You're back."

"Still talking to me?"

"Of course." What was the point in letting him know he'd wounded her? Keep it friendly. But not too friendly. "You must have had a good trip."

"It did not go as I expected. Have dinner with me tonight?"

Hello, five days of silence? Uh, no. She schooled her face to remain neutral. "I promised to help REXY tonight. What about lunch tomorrow?"

"Yeah." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I didn't let you know I'd be here today. No biggie. Lunch tomorrow is fine."

She smiled, but her nails were digging into her hands. Why was she shaking? What had happened? He watched her for a moment, bounced on his feet as though he couldn't decide to come in or not. Would she be able to hold it together if he did? It didn't matter. He promised to see her at lunch and left. It took every bit of concentration she had in her to complete her list of assignments for the day.



She should have agreed to dinner. She succumbed to sweats and T-shirt, with fluffy socks to protect against the chill of the wood floors. She walked to the fireplace and thought about turning it on. Walked to the window, wondering when the next snowfall would happen. After standing there for a few minutes, she went to the kitchen, but nothing appealed for dinner. Whiskers kept an eye on her from his perch among the plants. Light through the front window drifted across the kitchen cabinets. Someone pulled into the driveway. She tried to keep her heart from fluttering. It wasn't him, someone was using her driveway to turn around. She waited to see the lights reverse, but they didn't. They went out. Someone was here, and there was only one person she could think of.



His hands were shoved in the pockets of his jeans. "I can't wait until tomorrow. I wanted to speak to you today."

Standing in stocking feet and staring at Stan in the doorway, Avery was having a harder time staying distant than she had at the office. "Um, sure, come in."

"Are you okay?"

What right did he have to be concerned about her? All these stupid emotions had been brought up because of him ignoring her. "Fine." She wasn't. Yes, she was. "What's up?"

Avery sat on the couch, feet tucked beneath her as usual. Deep breaths. Stay calm. Expect the hurt. Let it happen. Get it over with. Move on.

Stan paced. "The incident with Mrs. Carpenter frightened me." He stopped, reconsidered. "Not fear, more like uncomfortable."

Mrs. Carpenter? Avery thought. Oh, "The woman in the park."

"Yes. You know me, I'm a people person. I've been drawn to life-coaching for several years. I love helping people, but some want more than the kind of help I'm willing to offer. I'd been praying about it for some time. You probably don't understand."

You'd be surprised. Avery focused on her nails. She needed a file. Needed him to get it over with.

"I contemplated moving home, before meeting you. I submitted a few applications. My plan was to work in physical therapy and continue life-coaching on the side. My PT license is valid in Washington."

She looked up. He was watching her. Puzzled, trying to figure something out. She drew her brows together. What did he expect from her?

"I was offered a job. It seemed like an answer to prayer, but ..." he motioned at her.

"You're moving to Washington?"

"No. I needed to see you."

He really was leaving. "But you've been offered a job? Where?"

"Seattle."

"That's like twenty-six states away."

"I wanted to talk to you because if I leave my business here, I need something else. My degree is in physical therapy."

"Why do you want to stop the life-coach thing?" She shouldn't ask. She should have said everything was hunky dory and let him get on his way, because she wouldn't allow herself to crumble until he was gone.

"Avery, what's wrong?"

He seemed genuinely concerned, closing the distance between them. No way was he touching her. She jumped to her feet and stalked to the other side of the room. "I'm fine. I understand." She swallowed, noticed her throat tightening. "You need a new job which means moving to Seattle. You're so good with people, you'll make an amazing PT."

He narrowed his eyes.

Avery continued. "You need to leave. Yeah, I get it. Remy, she's going to need to leave. We'll still be friends, but the baby and Buzz, they're the important ones. Mom and Dad, they had to leave. They didn't want to, but they had to. You have to leave. The job is important. Everybody has to leave. I've got my business, I'll be okay." And she would, eventually. But not right now. Everything hurt right now, every inch of her heart. She couldn't say anything else, and pressing her hand against her eyes wasn't stopping anything.

"Babe." Stan took her in his arms.

She wanted to push him away, but she didn't dare move her hand, because if tears started to fall, she might not be able to stop them. Placing her head on his chest made her feel a smidge better.

"I'm not leaving you, I promise. What is going on?"

She turned her head to the side. She might as well tell him everything. "Remy and I talked about selling her part of the company." Oh, great, she'd become one of those women who spoke in sobs. "She wants to stay home with her baby. Of course, she does."

"Where did your parents go?" His hand rubbed circles on her back.

"They died at the beginning of twelfth grade. They left in the morning and never came home. Never spoke to me again."

He pulled her as close as he could. "And I leave for almost a week and no word. Oh, hon, forgive me. I didn't know."

Eleven years. Her breath shook as she pulled air in and pushed it out. Frightened and alone in the house.

"Hey, hey," Stan shifted her head to look at him. His thumbs wiped at the tears on her cheeks.

The memories were coming back. Things she didn't want to remember.

"What happened?"

"They weren't there for dinner. Nobody answered at the office." That night so long ago, she'd fixed a bowl of noodles, but didn't eat much, just pushed them around while she looked at the empty chairs. "It was almost midnight when the police came."

"You were alone?"

"Yes." Why did his eyes have to shine with compassion? "I sat by the door all night long, waiting for them to come home. The police couldn't be right."

"What about your grandparents?"

She shook her head. "It was only us. The Three Musketeers." She hadn't been able to watch those movies since. "Rexy's parents found me in the morning. They somehow managed to take care of everything. I went and lived with the Smiths until college."

He kissed her forehead, and she dropped her head on his chest once more. Weariness washed over her. He must have noticed, because he picked her up and sat on the wide overstuffed chair, holding her on his lap. She struggled to pull away, but he pulled her head close to his.

"Just for a moment. Let someone be strong for you."

There was no fight left. She sagged.



A warm, snoring pillow? What on earth? Stan had managed to pull up a hassock and cover them with a blanket, and she hadn't stirred once. His arms were loosely draped around her, and she was mostly on, and partially off, him. Um, she'd fallen asleep? They'd fallen asleep? The snore thing wasn't loud or obnoxious, it was sort of pleasant. Her body had an odd lethargy. All the emotions boiling over during the week seemed to have dissipated. She felt oddly calm and somewhat sad. Still uncertain if he was staying or leaving.

His hand moved, brushing hair away from her cheek. "Hey, sleepyhead. How are you feeling?"

She cuddled against him, and he pressed his lips against her head. "Nature calls or I wouldn't want to move."

She rolled to the side, and he pulled himself up. She grabbed the blanket before it fell to the ground and angled her legs so she was leaning against the back of the chair. She must have drifted off again

because the next thing she knew he was kissing her goodbye. She grabbed his hand. "Don't go."

He sat on the edge of the seat. "I shouldn't stay."

She scooted around, legs over one arm, head against the other. He looked the same, but she felt different. Freed from a weight she hadn't known she'd been carrying. "I'm sorry I didn't have more faith in you." He leaned against her legs. It felt good.

"I didn't know. I never would have hurt you."

"I didn't realize it myself. How strange to not know I was holding it all in?"

"My plan was to ask you to come to Seattle. But when I got back here, watching you work in your office ... why would you give away your career for me? And maybe going back to Washington wasn't a good idea."

"But you had to see your family."

"I don't mean the visit. I mean moving."

This was so confusing. "Are you staying or going?"

He picked her hand up, wrapping their fingers together. "Yes. We are staying or going."

"We." Smiling, she pointed at him and herself. His answering grin made her feel spectacular.

"Yes. We. Because you and I happen to be in love, and I happen to think our relationship is important."

"Okay then. You and me." Her fragile heart strengthened.

"May I go home now?"

"Yes."

They made no effort to pull their hands apart.

Chapter 61

Avery was changing. Stan smiled as he watched her. The huge chip on her shoulder had been a doozie. What would have happened if he'd lost his parents in high school? The thought of not seeing his mother bustling in the kitchen, not helping his dad in the workshop, the house being empty ... his throat closed up just thinking about it. Avery had lived the nightmare. Being freed from her pain, she smiled quicker, joked more. She held his hand as he prayed over the food, and she repeated each 'amen.' Small steps that made him think God knew what He was doing after all.



A few days later, Stan joined Avery at the gym.

"What will you be doing Christmas?" Stan whirled on the bike beside her. His trail was across New York.

Avery selected Amish country but tried to push her pace faster. "Rexy's parents always insisted I go to their place when we were in college. I spent all my breaks, including summers. with them."

"How did you feel when you were with them?"

"They're sweet. I never felt alone, and I never had to worry I was in the way. They love me like a daughter."

"You love them, too."

"I do. I remember the morning Mrs. Smith came in. She sat beside me on the floor and took me in her arms."

"Would you consider spending part of Christmas with me?"

"I'd love to." She beamed at him. "Join us for dinner. Your family isn't coming back for Christmas, are they?"

He shook his head. "Shouldn't you ask first?"

She laughed. "Heavens no. Mrs. Smith makes a ton of food. It's easy enough to pull another chair up to the table."

"Then I would love to join you. It will be our first Christmas together."

Beyond the ache in her legs and her racing heart from the aerobics it was taking to push up what was supposed to be a small hill, Avery tingled with happiness. How many more Christmases would follow?



Time passes quickly. Avery looked at the starred box on the wall calendar. Christmas next week? How had *that* happened? At least her list of projects was marked complete. Nothing more until next year. And then what? Avery stared out the window. What changes would the new year bring?

A knock sounded at the door, jarring her out of her wandering thoughts.

Rexy leaned into the office and waved. "Mr. Scanlin must have plans. We finished the meeting in record time."

"How are your plans coming along for Christmas Eve? What should I bring?"

"Your handsome man will suffice. Buzz and I have things in hand."

Avery grinned. "You're catering."

Rexy sat across from her. "This way we get to enjoy all the fun and none of the mess. I don't know why I didn't think of it years ago."

"Is it the same company we use for our office party?"

She nodded. "They offered a discount. I spoke with Lacey about staying home with Baby Buzz after he gets here. She said she started as a stay-at-home mom a few years ago and hated it."

"Doesn't mean you'll hate it."

"But I might. This," she waved her arms, "is where I get to be creative. Challenged. What better place for Baby Buzz?"

"Baby REXY. You mean offer child care?"

"We have room."

Avery tugged her upper lip with her teeth. "I'm not sure. You were talking about staying home. If things work out with Stan, he may have a job in Seattle."

"Washington state Seattle? Oh, Ave ... wait a minute, what do you mean if things work out? Will you go to?"

"I don't know." Was REXY's look excited or sad? Avery couldn't tell for sure. "Maybe? Maybe not. There's you, Buzz, and baby. Your parents." It wouldn't work. She couldn't leave them all, could she?

"Don't worry about me and Buzz." REXY grabbed her hands and squeezed. "I am quite capable of hopping on a plane. Stan is important, I'll be thrilled if the two of you make it. The baby thing is an idea."

"A good idea. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You are going to let God lead you. Having a partner in life isn't all roses, but it *is* definitely worth the risks. A good partner who loves God is always worth the risk."

Stan loved God. God wasn't too keen on her, but that was okay. Some things were better not to worry about. REXY rubbed her side, and Avery focused on her friend. "How's that baby doing?"

"Not making me puke every day anymore, thank the good Lord." REXY patted her thickening waist, although Avery didn't notice much difference.

"Rest when you need to."

"I can accomplish quite a lot putting my feet up. The lounge in my office has a new purpose."

Avery laughed. "Who are you kidding? You'll still be taking your creative breaks."

"Dreaming is very creative. I get many of my best ideas when I'm dreaming."



The informal meeting ended, and Avery looked around her office. Two windows provided plenty of light. She had four easels for display and a desk with history. She'd worked hard for five years to get to this point. How easy would it be to start over? "I've done it once; I can do it again." She muttered to the four walls. Business was good, but that could change. A working relationship between her and Stan could be worth changing everything.

Whiskers' half-hearted greeting did nothing to alleviate her churning thoughts. Her parents, Stan, the possibility of moving to Seattle, leaving Remy ... her emotions seethed. Changing out of her work clothes, and donning her favorite sneakers, Avery tied the laces. Running was becoming a new pastime. Clouds covered the sky, adding a touch of gloom to the chill in the air, as she stepped onto the street that wrapped around the neighborhood. What if she moved and she and Stan didn't work? Remy has been there for her since elementary school. She was supposed to leave with a baby on the way? How did people make important decisions? Life was better when she didn't have Stan to complicate matters. No, it wasn't. Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, life brightened when Stan showed up. She felt alive. From the beginning when they'd met in the coffee shop, comradeship drew them together. Were there really such things as soul mates? There was such a sense of belonging between the two of them that she hadn't felt since her parents died. She wanted to believe it was real.

Why had God taken them? Why had He allowed her parents to leave her alone in the world? Every important moment that should have mattered, they missed. What if God took Stan? Avery stopped for a moment and bent over to breathe. A crimson bird fluttered across her line of sight. She stood and watched it journey over the brown field. It perched on a branch and bent its beak to something in the bark. Even in the dead of winter, birds managed to find sustenance. Perhaps she had the wrong perspective.

No. It was easier to blame God for taking Mom and Dad. Look what she'd accomplished despite everything. She resumed running. What had she accomplished? A neurotic reliance on food for mood

enhancement? Her business had come through training provided by the annuity left from her parents. Sanity remained because Remy stayed with her through the years. Even through hurt and heartache, provision had been made. She'd connected with Stan because of Paul's betrayal.

Was it possible God had provided for her all this time, and she hadn't realized it?

Chapter 62

He should have asked her once more to join him for church. Stan watched an older couple lean together, laughing and holding hands. What would it be like to worship with Avery? To love God together? He stood near the front of the church, waiting for Mr. Overly to hang his jacket on the coat tree. He'd help the older gentleman to his seat, and at the same time, he itched to call her.

Mr. Overly's hand fell against his shoulder. "Son." The old man's eyes were clear. "Whatever has you so antsy, wait on the Lord."

How could he know? How could he have any idea what was on his mind? Stan offered a lopsided grin as he offered his arm for assistance.



Sunday morning, Avery looked in the mirror. Her dress hung big, but she wrapped a belt around her waist. She shouldn't go. It would be so much easier not to. This was her day for sleeping through the morning hours. The little preacher she'd met a few weeks ago wouldn't remember her. She hadn't told Stan she'd thought about going so, of course, he wouldn't have known to invite her to his church, again. He had tried a time or two, but she'd declined. She'd never asked what church he went to. Maybe she should wait and go next week.

She glared at herself in the mirror. "You are the queen of excuses. Stop worrying about everything and go." She rolled her eyes. Fine.

Sitting behind the wheel of the car watching stragglers enter the small church, she almost lost her nerve again. They wouldn't like her.

She wouldn't know when to stand or sit and embarrass herself. She could sit in the back pew and slip out before anyone noticed. Maybe she'd get the chance to tell the preacher thank you for his help.

Avery forced herself from the car. Enough is enough. You are an adult, act like it. Someone at the door smiled and handed her a folded piece of paper. She ducked into the back row. She sat and looked at the paper. It had an image of the church on the outside and a schedule inside. Information about Christmas Eve services, a potluck on New Year's Eve, times listed for a prayer meeting, and a verse. *Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world.* She touched the words. Was God speaking to her?



A shadow in his periphery caused him to turn. Joy flamed to life as he watched Avery slide into the back row. She hunched over, peering intently at the bulletin, pulling her hair from behind her ear so it would fall across her face. She looked about as uncomfortable as a mouse on a cat farm.

She didn't notice him; she barely looked up when the organ started playing. Stan ambled down the aisle that ran alongside the wall until he reached the back of the church. He excused his way through the few others sitting there until he could sit next to Avery. "Are you following me? Because if you are, next time I'll pick you up and we'll have more time together."



Whispered words, but she'd recognize his baritone anywhere. Stan? He scooted next to her. Pleasure welled up from the confusion and uncertainty, and she threw her arms around him and squeezed. He pressed a quick kiss against her head and leaned over for a song book.

She recognized most of the carols they sang. She tried to follow along, but her mind wandered. What were the chances she'd end up in the same church as Stan without knowing? The stained-glass windows of the church were lit by sunshine this time. A baby in a manger. A man dying on a cross. A shepherd keeping watch over his sheep. A bit of her heart cracked open, and she blinked tears from her eyes. Stan held her hand during the sermon, and her eyes kept wandering to the image of the shepherd.



Stan placed a steaming Styrofoam cup of tea in front of Avery before taking the seat beside her. "How did you find this place?" She sat in his church, hands wrapped around the cup. His mind reeled.

"I was running at night a few weeks ago. The light was on, and something drove me inside. I met the preacher."

"Pastor Lingham. He's a friendly sort."

"He is." Her smile loosened. "We sat and talked a while. It's been in my head to visit ever since then. I didn't know this was your church."

"A year ago I went to a Bible study. Pastor Lingham was one of the leaders. I liked his manners. I hadn't found a church home yet, so I decided to come here."

"I was mad at God for so long. I went numb like it didn't matter one way or the other. At the very least, I thought He didn't care."

"At the most?"

"He hated me."

"You don't think He hates you anymore?" He waited for her answer.



Avery opened her mouth, but how could she explain the thoughts running rampant in her head? The image of the shepherd came to mind. She took a breath. "I think He's provided every step of the way. There was always something helping me move forward. I don't like the things that have happened, but I'm stronger because of them. I hadn't realized how much stronger until now."

"Is it possible God loves you?"

"He brought you into my life."

He shook his head. "I'm a fallible person, like everyone else."

"Yes, you are. So am I." She reached for his hand.

"Are you willing to trust God with our relationship?"

"I need to learn how, but I think I am. What about you?"

"Definitely." His voice sounded eager. Strong, like it was important to him.

It made her wonder if she could glow.

Chapter 63

As a child, I remember repeating a small verse every day in December. December first to Christmas is the longest time of year. Why is it, as an adult, it's no longer long? The days pass fast enough to leave me off kilter. What have I missed? What hasn't been done? I'm moving too quickly to plan meals, running around enough to not have to worry about going to the gym. But is this truthfully how I want to spend Christmas? Is this how I want to welcome the New Year? When did the "stuff" get bigger than the joy of spending time with those we love?



Christmas and New Year's passed quickly. Avery was very much aware of it this year. She and Stan celebrated Christmas Eve at Remy's after the candlelight service at church, and then enjoyed dinner on Christmas at the Smith's. Their New Year's Eve kiss made her heart skip, although not as wildly as when sitting on the couch after the movie. And now it was Monday. The holiday season passed for another year. Offices reopened, smelling like lemon. Where did December go? Avery sat in her leather captain's chair resisting the urge to drop her head on the desk.

"Elaine did her usual New Year's Day cleaning. Is your desk sparkling?" Remy walked into her office.

"Smells fresh." Avery took a deep breath. "Ready for the New Year."

"Yes, we are. Buzz and I talked." Remy landed in the chair across from Avery's desk. "We want the business if you and Stan decide to move."

Avery started. Really? "What did Buzz think?"

"He thinks Stan is a keeper, and if we need to make trips to Seattle, so be it."

Avery smiled. Buzz's approval meant a lot. She'd heard plenty of snide remarks on her old boyfriend. "I'd prefer selling to you than turning it over to a stranger." Truth be told, she'd prefer keeping it.

"How was your first holiday season with Stan?"

"Full. I don't remember half of what happened. I feel like my head is running to catch up to my heart."

"It has been fast. It's been less than four months since you hired him as a life-coach, hasn't it?"

"How long did it take you to know Buzz was the one?"

Rexy's eyes gleamed. "Tour around campus."

"What? No way! You wouldn't even talk to him for at least a month."

"And yet," she placed her elbow on the desk and dropped her chin in her hand with a cute smile, "I managed to show up to the same places, making sure he stayed interested."

Avery stared at her best friend. "You primed him. He never had a chance." How had she not known? "You don't think I'm moving too fast?"

"If God is in it, I think you're safe."

Can't argue with that. More importantly, she didn't feel weighed down any longer. God had opened her heart to Him, which opened her to lots of possibilities.

Rexy reached across the desk and took her hands. "This will be the best year ever."

"Of course, you're having a baby." What other changes might happen? Rexy didn't say anything, but Avery knew she thought the same thing.

Work resumed after Rexy exited. Avery moved a figure on the computer screen, but the balance of the image still looked off. The phone rang, and she nabbed it without looking.

"A&R."

"Hey, kiddo."

Her heart melted at the sound of Stan's voice. "Hey, yourself."

"How do dinner and movie sound tonight?"

Blissful. Especially if it involves curling up on the couch together.

"What time should I get there?"

"Any time after four."

"I'll see you tonight." The day couldn't end fast enough.

The day passed in a blink, and before she knew it, Avery sat in her car and watched rain run across her windshield. *Trust God.* She hadn't started the car yet. Showers in January? She closed her eyes. "I trust you, God. I don't want to lose my business, but if moving to Seattle is what You have in store for Stan and me, then so be it." She rested her head against the hot pink steering wheel cover. "Stand with us, show me we can be strong together. I know I'll be able to build something new if need be." It felt strange. She was letting go, not to Stan, but to God. Whatever happened would be good for them, because their future relied on God. Avery smiled. Her chest felt lighter. Good things could come of this.

Driving to Stan's took longer than expected. Meditating in the car until rush hour traffic was in full swing didn't help. Neither did the grandma brigade clogging the streets. With a resounding sigh of relief, she pulled into his drive. The garage door slid up, and he waved her inside. His SUV was close, but she managed. Ah, sweet man. She wouldn't have to dodge raindrops until she went home. Hopefully, the rain would stop by then.

He opened her door and kissed her until she knew rainy days weren't bad at all. Eventually, she was seated at the kitchen island watching him sauté new potatoes and onions.

"Rexy and I talked about selling the company." She munched on a carrot. Saying it didn't send her into a tailspin. This was going to be okay.

"You don't have to sell anything." He glanced up from the burner although he continued to move the spatula across the pan.

"It's okay. I've prayed and considered what needs to be done. I'm not afraid of selling and moving on."

"I mean it; you don't have to get rid of your company. We aren't going to move to Washington."

"But the job, it's a good move for you."

"Staying in Georgia is proving to be a better one." He added beef stock and cubed meat to the pan then covered it. "Ethan and Beckie enjoyed their visit, they decided to move here as well." He stepped closer to her. "Once Mom and Dad found out Beckie's pregnant," he grinned. "Let's just say, the house was on the market before anyone could blink."

Avery clapped. "Beckie's pregnant? You're going to be an uncle."

"And you will be an aunt."

"To Rexy's baby. Think of all the spoiling we'll do."

"We'll be Aunt and Uncle to both. Maybe Mom and Dad to our own." He pulled a small box from his pocket. A fuzzy black box which looked a lot like it came from a jewelry store.

"What's that?" *No way. He wasn't ... was he?*

"I got you something." He stepped closer, looking positively joyful. "I love you. Completely mesmerized from the beginning. I think about raising children together, playing with grandchildren, and hobbling after you when we're in our dotage."

She snorted. "There's a romantic image."

He opened the box. On a white pillow lay a silver ring made from three bands woven together. The bands curved around a princess-cut diamond surrounded by blue sparkles. Avery opened her mouth but couldn't find the words to speak. Stunning, gorgeous—those didn't even suffice. Had he noticed she didn't wear gold-toned jewelry? Why did her eyes start to burn?

"Do you like it?"

"It's perfect." She whispered, trying to get around the frog lodged in her throat. And it was. She wouldn't have liked the traditional ring with a diamond standing up. This diamond nestled in the band.

"Then are you going to say yes?"

"You didn't ask me the question." She looked at him.

"I didn't, did I? Marry me, Avery Lee Jacobs. Become a Fischer like me." He placed the ring on her third finger. It slid perfectly into place. There was nothing too fat about her fingers.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed a variety of places on his face, resounding each one with "Yes."

He placed his hands on her cheeks to settle her and then kissed her properly, in a manner a man in love is want to do. Stew simmered, but neither of them seemed to notice.

Chapter 64

Want and need are two different things. I want to be healthy, but I don't need to be a size six. I need to love myself and know I am loved by God no matter what size I am. I want to be loved by the man in my life. Far too many years of my life have been spent deriding the woman I face in the mirror. I want to say 'no' more often, but sometimes I think I'm not working successfully enough. Not losing weight fast enough.

I've learned to go the extra mile these days. Smile more at the people I meet. Ask the person in front of me in line how their day is going. Pick up the toy dropped by the screaming baby and offer his mom an encouraging smile. Thank God, I can do all these things and not worry about being perfect. Not worry I haven't lived up to the world's standard of perfect.



Another Fall. Avery stared out the window. Clear skies, golden trees glittering in the sun. October first was a perfect day for a wedding. She looked at the silver ring on her finger, twisting it. Perfect day for *her* wedding.

"Daydreamer! You aren't dressed yet." Rexy screeched, pulling Avery from the window.

"Not so loud, you'll wake Baby Hope." Avery glanced at the bassinet in the corner of the room, but little Hope remained curled in a ball, her toosh scrunched up in the air.

"Our girl sleeps through cannon fire. It's time to dress."

Avery twirled. "It's a perfect day."

"It will be once you dress. No tardy brides on my watch."

Beckie slipped in, holding Gregory. The two-month-old had his fist around his mother's finger, as he stared at the silver sparkle hanging against her throat. "She's not dressed."

Beckie's Irish accent didn't keep Avery from rolling her eyes. "Time to dress, yes. I get that."

Beckie giggled. "Stan would have been standing at the altar as early as six this morning if you'd let him."

"So would she," Remy jerked her head toward Avery, "in sweats and slippers."

Beckie unzipped the gown bag. "La, it's lovely."

Avery pulled off her sweats, adjusted her white slip, and crawled into the wedding gown. Her size-sixteen-and-two-tucks-at-the-waist wedding gown. She turned to face the full-length mirror as Remy pulled the back together. A sweetheart neckline and empire waist suited her. She adjusted the small blue bow and let the long ribbons flow through her fingers onto the satiny-white fabric. She had wanted no other adornment than capped sleeves. Remy finished latching the back, and the three ladies gasped in pleasure.

Their blue matron dresses matched her ribbon. Remy, calling on her usual flair for style, had insisted on a high waist with a ton of pleats. Beckie's dress looked more like a traditional knee-length cocktail style. The three wrapped arms around each other with Avery in the middle.

"You are beautiful, my dearest friend." Remy kissed her temple.

"We are beautiful and blessed." Avery agreed.

"And still not ready." Beckie pulled away. "Hair and makeup. And what about shoes? You don't mean to wear slippers, do you?"

They would be more comfortable than wedges, Avery felt certain.

They moved to the dressing table. Avery sat in the chair and closed her eyes. Let them do their best.

Their best was more than Avery could ever imagine. God's best, more than she dared dream. She watched Remy walk down the middle aisle of the church that had become like home. They'd smoothed Avery's hair, and it hung to her shoulders, no more bangs. She didn't want or need a veil. The bouquet she gripped in her hands

was white and blue roses, thankfully devoid of thorns. Remy and Beckie's bouquets were white roses. The sweet strains of Pachelbel wove through the air, people stood, and the elderly church deacon offered a grin as Remy's father stepped beside her.

"Your parents are proud of you, kiddo." Mr. Smith—she still couldn't think of or call him Bob—wrapped his arm around hers.

"I believe they are." She felt her throat tighten. "Thank you, for everything."

They walked through the swinging doors. The first chords of The Wedding March resounded through the sanctuary, but Avery was more interested in the man standing at the front of the church. Waiting for her. No fear, no uncertainty, only love wafting through the air embracing her. And all around, God's love proved stronger still. No matter what lies ahead, Avery Jacobs-soon-to-be-Fischer, it was going to be good. Very, very good. Walking down the aisle toward her groom, Mr. Smith kept her from running ahead, but by the look on her face, she made sure Stan knew just how loved he was. And when her hands were twined with his, standing before a preacher, he made sure she knew he loved her as well.

About the Author



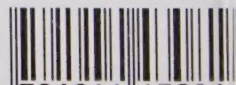
Laurie Boulden is a creative romantic with a passion for education. The stories of her imagination have kept her entertained since childhood. In this story, she shares some of her battles of being overweight, but more importantly, she stresses the love of God.

Laurie is an assistant professor of education at Warner University. When she isn't working, she's chasing cats from her keyboard, or puzzle if she happens to be working on one, and convincing the dog the evening walk can wait a few more minutes.

Weighed Down, Laurie Boulden's debut novel, received second place in Contemporary Christian Romance at the Florida Christian Writers Conference, 2016, and Laurie received the Writer of the Year award.

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Avery thinks her weight keeps her from close relationships, but as she works with a Life Coach, she's forced to face the ghosts of her past. The life she's built is based on more than what she thought.

Trying to lose weight sucks. Being single is worse. Avery has been overweight her whole life. It doesn't matter what she's good at. Doesn't matter the successes she has. Every event, every major moment has been marred by obesity. Avery's tired of losing battles, but who does she go to for help? Enter Life Coach Stan. He's going to force her to face fears keeping her weighed down, and she's going to find there's more going for her than her weight. If she's willing to release her past. But that's harder than she realizes; and with God against her, is it even possible?

The demon she's wrestling isn't obesity, because negative self-image is more than skin deep. Can she be freed from the chains of addiction? Rise above the lies impugned by society? Can she accept that only God loves completely?



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